

## Imagining Urban Futures

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Heinrich Wolff studied at Pretoria University and the University of Cape Town. He worked for Jo Noero from 1993 and in 1998 became a partner in Noero Wolff Architects. With the practice he has won several high profile awards. He has taught at universities in South Africa and in the USA and has taught in the B.Arch and BAS programmes at the University of Cape Town in the fields of Design, Theory and Technology.

His work and writing have been published nationally and internationally. His work has been exhibited in Sao Paolo, Berlin, Bayreuth, Venice, London, Chicago, Dubai, Ecuador, Florence and several venues in South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

Within the time allowed for this presentation I can hardly address a balanced range of issues dealing with the 'Future Life of the African City Centre'. I will introduce four topics that have been close to my heart that have bearing on the theme of the conference. My ideas about the city are influenced by the fact that I am an architect and academic working in Cape Town. As a practitioner I try to cultivate an eye for opportunity rather than a tongue paralysing critique. I hope that the issues raised will also have relevance for people from elsewhere and of different professional backgrounds.

I will draw no distinction between the city centre and any other parts of the city, since the problems and opportunities about which I will speak, have the same effect right across the city.

### IMAGINING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE CITY

This idea deals with the relationship between the green landscapes of the city and the built fabric. My proposition is that if we can imagine a new landscape we can imagine a new kind of city.

The most powerful conception of recent times dealing with the relationship between the built and the green landscape must be the idea of the 'garden city'. The adoption of this idea is so widespread that it almost creates the illusion that there are no alternatives. In spite of security problems turning the 'garden city' into the walled suburbs of South Africa, or the misanthropic attitudes of Apartheid that bastardised the idea into rows of houses without a spec of green, the idea persists as the underlying assumption to outdoor space for detached buildings.

And yet, there are exceptions everywhere around us:

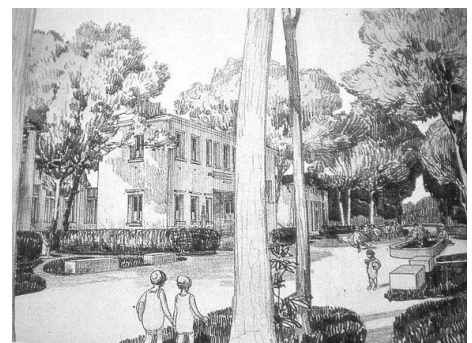


FIGURE 1: Tony Garnier's vision of a garden city (1908)

In the Western Cape where I am from, there are several *towns* that owe their existence to speculative land developers who would buy a farm, build an irrigation canal and lay out plots that would be served by gravity irrigation from the canal. No houses were built. The development was pure agricultural opportunity that was sold commercially. In some cases these 100-150 year old canals are still the backbone of these town economies (Figures 2 & 3).

These towns demonstrate the possibility of having alternative conceptions of the green environment and the impact these may have on the order of a settlement.

Let us consider for a moment the opportunities that urban agriculture could offer the city. Considering the morphology of the city, what are the chances, since the invention of pumps and pressurised irrigations systems, of the urban environment being structured fundamentally by agriculture, as was the case with gravity irrigation?

There are certainly many forms of contemporary irrigation that could have the most extraordinary implications for urban form. Imagine if we were to build in the space left over by the circular irrigation systems that are so endemic to South Africa (Figure 4).

As an urban activity, can urban agriculture ever make a meaningful contribution to food production and food security?

In Southern Africa agriculture accounts for 35% of the region's GDP, and 70% of the region's total population depends on agriculture for food, income and employment (Chiriga, 2009). And yet people face food shortages in a region that technically has sufficient intrinsic agriculture potential to feed itself and produce net surpluses. While 40% of the region's people live on less than 1\$ a day, a European cow receives a subsidy of more than 2\$ a day (Obasanjo, 2004).

Experts are very concerned about the undercapitalization of African agriculture (Dioné, 2004) and the decline in public expenditure on agriculture. Barely 7% of the arable and permanent cropland is irrigated, compare to about 40% in Asia. The number of tractors per thousand hectares of arable land is nearly 3 times greater in Asia and 8 times greater in Latin America (Dioné, 2004). With no infrastructure, peasant farmers have only two resources on offer, land and labour; and, very often, even access to land is problematic (Museveni, 2004). Therefore, it should be a political priority to create agricultural opportunities not only in the country, but also in the city. In the city there are so many parcels of land that could, even temporarily, be used for agriculture.

There are examples in the world of highly successful urban agriculture: By 2006, Cuba was producing over 1 kg of vegetables per person per day (Koont 2008:285).



FIGURE 2: Bonnievale, South Africa



FIGURE 3: Montagu, South Africa



FIGURE 4: Christiania, South Africa



FIGURE 5: Cuban organoponicos

The reasons for its success are somewhat surprising. Urban agriculture was not started by the Ministry of Agriculture, but rather the Ministry of Defence, in the face of possible isolation and consequential food shortages. The Cuban urban gardens, *organoponicos*, have "...become one of the mainstays of vegetable cultivation in Cuba [...]" (Sio Wong 2006), (Koont 2008:286).

The Cuban experience shows us what is possible, but my interest here is of course not with agriculture, but with the city. The possibility of active urban agriculture opens the door for alternative conceptions of the city.

The bustans of Sana'a in Yemen remain incredible examples of cities where the green is productive rather than purely decorative and creates a spatial order of open spaces which are neither squares nor streets, and which gives spatial relief to the density of the settlement (Figures 7 & 8).

In our practice we have had some opportunities to implement these ideas.

We were asked to design low income housing for an organisation whose members were involved in an agricultural NGO (Figure 9). It was agreed that we would achieve a housing density of 50 units per hectare. For the land to yield maximum opportunity, we compacted the housing on the eastern edge of the site leaving 7 ha of land available for agriculture.

Three scales of agriculture were catered for. The first is the possibility of a house garden. Residents could farm here or extend the house. The second scale is the communal allotment that could only be used for agriculture. Residents could share or collaborate on joint parcels of land if they wish. The third scale is that of a commercial farm for which the minimum size is 1 ha.

In this project we discovered that a basic onsite treatment plant could convert all waste water to usable irrigation water. The waste water generated by 300 dwelling units would be sufficient to supply irrigation water all year round.

We have implemented these ideas at the scale of a single house as well (Figure 10).

Urban agriculture is not the only alternative for the green landscape of the city. Several infrastructural projects could serve this purpose as well.

Karen de Beer, a thesis student under my supervision at the University of Cape Town, did a wonderful project investigating the potential that rain water capturing can have for ordering the city.

She was concerned that 90% of all storm water in the Cape Metropole ran into the sea without being captured



FIGURE 6: Urban agriculture in Cuba



FIGURE 7: Bustans, Sana'a, Yemen



FIGURE 8: Bustan, Sana'a, Yemen



FIGURE 9: Phillipi Housing project, Noero Wolff Architects

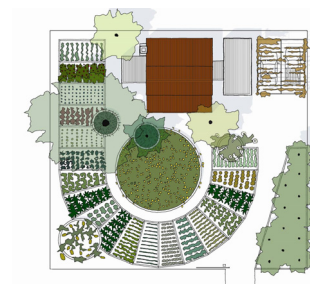


FIGURE 10: House with vegetable gardens and fruit trees, Noero Wolff Architects



or used. This is partly due to the fact that Cape Town has well developed storm water systems channelling the water straight to the sea. The existing storm water infrastructure was used in this project to collect the rain water as it does, but then to capture and re-use it for drinking water.

Firstly, the relationship between the amount of rain water falling on a given suburb and the amount of clean municipal water used by the same suburb was calculated (Figure 11). The project considered that if drinking water were not used for gardening then the ratio would reduce (Figure 12), and if the drinking water were not used for flushing toilets, the ratio would reduce even further (Figure 13). The result would be that the amount of storm water captured in a typical suburbs' storm water system would be equal to their drinking water needs.

The project then proceeded to establish natural water purifying systems that would change the neglected river edge of the suburb into a green heart (Figure 14). The idea was that the city council would develop natural water purifying systems that could double up as green open space. If this idea were to be implemented along the whole Black River, it would create urban connections between previously separated neighbourhoods.

Therefore, the future of our cities could be enriched by alternative conceptions of the green landscape. The idea of the urban landscape as idle greenery, useful only for leisure and decoration, is an impoverished view of *the city*.

**IMAGINING A FUTURE FOR THE PAST**

How we imagine the future of the city is to some extent contingent on what we know about the history of the city. This section of my presentation is a call to action to give presence to our history beyond what it has at the moment.

There is a drama unfolding in Cape Town around a shopping centre, called the Werdmuller Centre (Figure 15), a notoriously popular and problematic building, designed by Roelof Uytendogaardt in 1975. When its owners recently proposed the demolition of the building, it was met with huge resistance from particularly young architects and students.

Some interesting issues emerged from this situation. A generation of young architects were caught off-guard. A building that many loved was under threat of demolition but almost no one knew how to resist such a proposal. Most of the protesters were unfamiliar with the heritage legislation and its processes. Consequently they were unable to articulate why the building should be protected. The accusation was made that the *owners* did not care about the value of this important building. But as the protestations unfolded something else became



FIGURE 11: Current water need compared to rainfall



FIGURE 12: Current water need without garden irrigation compared to current rainfall



FIGURE 13: Current water needs without garden irrigation and toilets compared to current rainfall



FIGURE 14: Green public open space created by water purifying systems

clear: the *protesters* themselves have done very little to contribute to the protection of *any* building in the past.

Heritage legislation alone cannot protect the built environment. The survival of great buildings requires a knowledgeable and proactive architectural fraternity. In our context it means that we should get involved in documenting valuable buildings and, following from this, proposing buildings to the heritage authorities for protection.

Let me show you what happens when the heritage authorities have no lists of valuable contemporary buildings that should be protected. The Broadway (Figure 16) was designed by Roy Kantorowich and Norman Hanson, arguably two of the most influential architects of their time in South Africa. The building is a good representation of their work and the ideas of their time. The merits of the case aside, in a redevelopment, this building was defaced, firstly through the ignorance of the new architects who did not know *and* did not bother to find out who designed it. Secondly, when the building was submitted for council scrutiny, the official evaluating the submission had no lists of contemporary buildings considered worthy of protection that could allow these officials to *legally* demand further consideration of the building's cultural value. Hence the building was defaced (Figure 17).

You may or may not share my view that this building is a sad loss, but this example shows us that almost any kind of masterpiece younger than sixty years can be demolished.

I therefore urge young architects to get involved, understand the legislation and participate in documenting whatever *you* believe to be valuable. The initiative shown by Roger Fisher and others in establishing 'Artefacts' and ABLEUP created by Nicholas Clarke, websites dedicated to the documentation of South African architecture, and the initiative to get Docomomo South Africa started, are important steps in the right direction.

The heritage of many eras and of different sectors of society all need to play a constructive role in the future of our democratic society. The pre-colonial built heritage is very badly documented and as a consequence has almost no impact on the present. For instance, the history of pre-colonial mining is an enormous achievement for Southern Africa that sheds light on village life, regional economic interaction and a sense of Southern Africa without national borders, let alone dispelling the myth of the so-called gold discovery!

Our colonial heritage is fairly well documented, but today the challenge is to claim this heritage for our entire society so that its value can be greater than mere commodified history. In contrast, the built heritage of indigenous people and lesser fortunate immigrants



FIGURE 15: Werdmuller Centre, Cape Town, South Africa



FIGURE 16: The Broadway, Heerengracht, Cape Town (photo 1970's)



FIGURE 17: The Broadway, Heerengracht, Cape Town (2009)



FIGURE 18: South African websites dedicated to documentation and archiving of architecture and settlements



during the colonial period is poorly documented and much of the existing documentation is rightly subject to critical re-reading. What is almost *entirely absent* from the colonial history is a contemporary 'picture' of the coming together of different people in rural or urban settlements. These images of coexistence (of whatever kind) are essential in fusing the otherwise segregated bits of history together.

If we look at the more recent architectural heritage, not protected by the 60 year clause of the National Heritage Act, this era includes most of South Africa's Modernist architecture and the entire era of Apartheid.

Major projects that formed part of the apparatus of the Apartheid state are under threat of destruction or meaningless transformation. I am referring here to mining hostels, beer halls, pass offices, military camps on the periphery of townships, etc. While the urge to destroy buildings that caused so much suffering and division is understandable, the country should protect key buildings that could tell future generations what happened. Buildings like the mine hostels in Welkom (Figure 19) need to remind future generations what the magnitude of economic exploitation was, or the beer hall in Langa (Figure 20), central to four hostels, demonstrating at what cost white city councils benefited from monopolising the liquor trade.

Many of these buildings have lost their original use and we are seeing more and more upgrades or demolitions taking place. These buildings are an important part of our political *and* Modernist heritage and we should be careful that well intentioned upgrades do not assign this entire legacy of buildings to the domain of intangible heritage. I am not arguing for the preservation of these Apartheid era buildings. In stead, this is a plea to firstly document these buildings and secondly to acknowledge the gravity of their histories in considering new futures.

I applaud the heritage work on Constitution Hill where both the Constitutional Court (Figure 21) and the Gender Commission buildings have incorporated old jails in the new buildings in a way that signifies a triumph over oppression whilst retaining their spatial memories.

Our protected heritage does not yet reflect all the stories and all the people of the country. This mismatch requires action that represents an opportunity for academic work, but also for new building types and public places that could give character to the city in ways nothing else could. Without deep and diverse heritage taking its rightful place in shaping the future of our cities, we will mythologize our past and create a present without depth.

### IMAGINING THE CITY THROUGH A BUILDING

The city centre or any of its districts have a particular character that is the result of its topography, green



FIGURE 19: Mine hostels, Welkom, South Africa



FIGURE 20: Hostels design around a beer hall, Langa, Cape Town, South Africa



FIGURE 21: Constitutional Court, Johannesburg, South Africa

landscape, urban form, social history, demographics, visual culture, etc. as well as its proximity to other districts and their distinguishing features. A city has a character like a person is said to have character, some are more memorable than others. These characteristics constitute some sort of an inheritance with both positive and negative attributes.

Through the engagement with, and development of the characteristics of the city in a building, we demonstrate perceived value. All too often a condemning gaze is cast over portions of our cities – from the assumed subservience of the colonizers' gaze to contemporary governments who, in their efforts to improve living conditions, condemn the houses and the settlements that people have built themselves. The careless condemnation of human effort and urban culture is so widespread that I believe we have to react through architectural and urban projects to validate past achievements.

Across Africa, architects are often required to do buildings in areas where all the surrounding buildings are constructed by people for themselves without architects ever being involved. If new projects in contexts such as these show no understanding or sympathy for past achievements of the settlement, it amounts to a condemnation of the place and the cultures of its people.

I believe that the peculiarity of any settlement can stimulate invention in design in ways that few other things can. Let me demonstrate this through some projects we have been involved in.

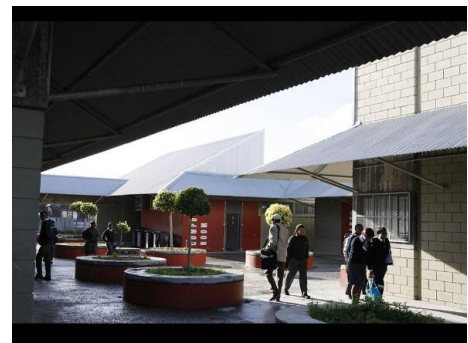
We were asked to do this school in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. At the time the site was surrounded by informal settlement. In an effort to validate the achievement of the community to construct their own living environment, we decided to participate in the spatial character of the informal settlement. The main circulation space of the school was given an undulating character that varied in size as one moves along it. Important moments like the hall or the entrance to the library, computer room and administration are clustered around the enlargements in the space.

The character of this space was further manipulated to mimic informal settlement in that it creates visual enclosure with openings out of the space only at important moments such as the street.

The undulating character of the informal settlement was seen as a positive and productive analogy to pursue in the project. The fact that this site, like those of four adjoining schools, had long narrow lanes on either side – where access to the neighbourhood leading off these lanes were controlled by gangs – was not seen as a positive attribute and the lanes were therefore obliterated. We moved the site of the school over the one



**FIGURE 22:** Usasazo Secondary School, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Noero Wolff Architects



**FIGURE 23:** Central circulation space, Usasazo Secondary School, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Noero Wolff Architects

lane and a thoroughfare, double the size, was made to the north. This allowed vehicular thoroughfare, which ended the gang control of the passages between all the schools.

Our practice won a competition for a museum that would commemorate the Struggle against Apartheid in general and the resistance in Red Location, a township in Port Elizabeth, in particular. The urban morphology of this area was created 100 years ago by a grid of corrugated iron houses (Figure 24). The dilapidated condition of the houses, coupled with promises of government subsidised houses, made people see this historic building fabric as worthless. It was demolished by the community and rebuilt as shacks in the backyards of their new houses on the same day they received the keys to these houses.

The loss of this historic urban fabric is sad, but understandable. With these events unfolding under our eyes as we were busy with the project, it created an opportunity for us to commemorate this urban history as another layer in the Struggle history of the area.

Superimposed on other metaphors, the display spaces of the museum (Figure 25) became evocative of the village made up of a grid of corrugated iron houses.

The sources of invention are often under our noses. We need to balance a knowledge and respect for the existing with critical judgement and the need for invention.

## REPRESENTING THE NATION IN THE CITY

The issue of nationalism is far too big an issue to discuss here today, but the issue has such importance to many and its consequences are so prevalent, that I feel compelled to make some comments.

Culturally South Africa is going through a very self-conscious time, which is predictable and natural considering its recent political transformations. I am therefore not sure whether this issue occurs with the same regularity elsewhere as it does here. Something that seems to repeat itself often in debates about cities and architecture is a question about connection to the nation or the continent. A typical question would be: "How do you create an authentic South African architecture?" or "Is this an African city?" The essence for me in this enquiry is a question of nationalism. In short, should we or could we represent the country, or the continent, in our work?

A 'nationalism' has been described by Anderson (2006:15) as an 'imagined community' that can exist at many scales, not just that of a country. For instance, the Islamic community in Africa is an international community whose boundary stretches across countries and outside the continent. In contrast, Afrikaner Nationalism in South Africa was a sub-state nationalism where this imagined community was not even the majority in the country. Imagined communities define themselves through a unifying principle such as religion, language, gender,

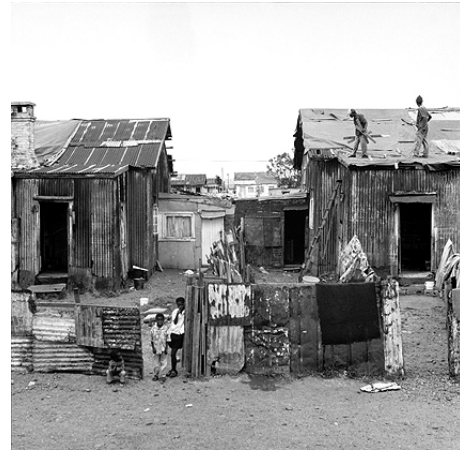


FIGURE 24: Historic corrugated iron houses, Red Location, Port Elizabeth, South Africa



FIGURE 25: Doorways to 'memory boxes', Museum of Struggle, Red Location, Port Elizabeth, South Africa



sexual preference, etc. A nation state can therefore contain several imagined communities with different geographic reaches which would only rarely correspond with the borders of the country itself. In other words, the diversity of our nation does not correspond to the geography of our country.

I would therefore argue that it is not only *impossible* to represent the country or the continent creatively, but also *undesirable*.

It is *impossible*, since giving *representative* expression to the diversity inside our country or continent would be such an extensive task that the complexity is beyond the grasp of a single project or a creative team. To my mind, there is also no precedent of any architect ever managing to first distill a national identity and then given expression to it. The strong association people may have with Brazil through the work of Oscar Niemeyer, for instance, is associative and comes about after the work has been completed. We must not confuse these connections that the public makes between place and architecture after the completion with the artistic intentions of its designers. I think Oscar Niemeyer is more interested in being himself than representing the Brazilian nation, which is only right.

I am not making an argument against references to the local, on the contrary I have argued before on the importance of this matter. But the references that we make in our work are international, continental, regional, metropolitan, and personal. They are also technological, ideological, societal and philosophical. My argument is that to give expression to the nation or the continent in a *representative* manner, is impossible.

More importantly, it is *undesirable* to give expression to the country or continent. I am not denying that many have tried to do so through architecture or city making, but as a method of work it necessarily involves selection, essentialising and exclusion to yield any result. Complexity is negated, boundaries are drawn, 'us' and 'them' are created in an instant. Defining the nation also involves defining what we are not. The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa made us painfully aware of what happens if the importance of our national borders is overestimated. Similarly, the idea of creating a South African architecture takes our country's borders *culturally* more seriously than we can justify.

We should be mindful of the difference between the political and cultural domains. In South Africa, nation building has been a very useful *political* pursuit to encourage conflicting sides of our society to live in peace despite their differences. As a *cultural* pursuit, it would be tragic if the rich diversity of South Africa were to be collapsed into a single national culture. Herein lies a limit to the validity of the argument; the possibility of expressing the diversity of our society is contingent upon peace and personal freedoms. "[...] freedom of agency that we individually have", Amartya Sen (1999:xi) argued "is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us."

My argument is, to acknowledge the impossibility and undesirability of a national expression gives insight into the *nature* of our creative work and the *responsibilities* that go with it.

The fundamental difference between an architect or urbanist who subscribes to a national identity and someone who does not, is their level of creative freedom (see Ivor Chipkin's (2007) distinction between the citizen and the national subject). It is liberating to understand that the vitality of our society demands that each of us offers our own experiences and insights, from wherever we come from, to the collective image of ourselves. As cosmopolitan citizens, our right to express ourselves, as we deem fit, is protected by the Constitution. This freedom comes with the responsibility towards our society that is endemic to the public nature of our art. We need to claim this freedom since the future of our cities depends on it!

To conclude, the future of the African city will depend on the care with which we accept our heritage and the creative efforts we make in claiming and transforming it. Rethinking and redesigning the city and its spaces is a fundamental task in adjusting them to our purposes and giving expression to who we are as a society.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Drawing by Tony Garnier on <http://ilyaunsiecle.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/02/19/19-fevrier-1908-garnier-le-bonheur-est-dans-le-beton-arme/>. 19 February 2008. Downloaded on 13 August 2009.

Figure 2: "Bonnievale." 33° 56' 20.85"S and 20° 05' 23.72" E. Google Earth. February 18, 2003. Downloaded 15 August 2009.

- Figure 3: "Montagu." 33° 47' 28.56"S and 20° 07' 13.01"E. Google Earth. April 26, 2006. Downloaded 15 August 2009.
- Figure 4: "Christiana" 27° 55' 53.21"S and 25° 09' 45.42". Google Earth. August 7, 2005. Downloaded 15 August 2009.
- Figure 5: [www.panoramio.com/photos/original/21635692.jpg](http://www.panoramio.com/photos/original/21635692.jpg). Downloaded 17 August 2009.
- Figure 6: <http://cbitsanpablo.wordpress.com/>. Downloaded 17 August 2009.
- Figure 7: "Bustans of Yemen" 15° 21' 27.36"N and 44° 12' 47.96"E. Google Earth. September 4, 2004. Downloaded 17 August 2009.
- Figure 8: [flickr.com/photos/88943727@N00/2918211995/](http://flickr.com/photos/88943727@N00/2918211995/)
- Figure 9: Phillipi Housing project. Phillipi, Cape Town. Drawing by Evandro Scwalbach, Noero Wolff Architects.
- Figure 10: House Isaacs, Parkwood, Cape Town. Drawing by Heinrich Wolff, Noero Wolff Architects.
- Figure 11: De Beer, K. 2007. UCT, B.Arch Thesis. Current water need compared to current rainfall.
- Figure 12: De Beer, K. 2007. UCT, B.Arch Thesis. Current water need without garden irrigation compared to current rainfall.
- Figure 13: De Beer, K. 2007. UCT, B.Arch Thesis. Current water needs without garden irrigation and toilets compared to current rainfall.
- Figure 14: De Beer, K. 2007. UCT, B.Arch Thesis. Green public open space created by water purifying systems.
- Figure 15: Werdmuller Centre, Claremont, CapeTown. Photo by Heinrich Wolff, 2009.
- Figure 16: The Broadway, Heerengracht, Cape Town, Photo by Julian Cooke, 1970's.
- Figure 17: The Broadway, Heerengracht, Cape Town, Photo by Heinrich Wolff, 2009.
- Figure 18: [www.artefacts.co.za](http://www.artefacts.co.za) & [www.ableup.org](http://www.ableup.org) , South African websites dedicated to documentation and archiving of architecture and settlements.
- Figure 19: "Welkom". 28° 04' 51.64" S and 26° 51' 48.97" E. Google Earth. January 27, 2008. Downloaded 18 August 2009.
- Figure 20: "Langa". 33° 56' 47.99" S and 18° 31' 31.88" E. Google Earth. March 5, 2008. Downloaded 18 August 2009.
- Figure 21: <http://designworkshopsa.withtank.com/>. Downloaded 31 October 2010.
- Figure 22: Usasazo Secondary School, Khayelitsha, Cape Town , Noero Wolff Architects. Photo by Iwan Baan, 2009.
- Figure 23: Central circulation space, Usasazo Secondary School, Khayelitsha, Cape Town , Noero Wolff Architects. Photo by Iwan Baan, 2009.
- Figure 24: Historic corrugated iron houses, Red Location, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Photo by Rob Duker.
- Figure 25: Doorways to 'memory boxes', Museum of Struggle, Red Location, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Photo by Iwan Baan, 2010.

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