



## The Vulnerable Asylum

*investigating an architecture of difference in a migrant society*



## **The Vulnerable Asylum:**

Investigating an architecture of difference in a migrant society

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**Study field:**

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**Programme:**

A knowledge and information centre that accommodates skills training workshops, language classes, a community radio station and library to extend as well as promote social upliftment and cohesion. Secondary support functions include legal aid offices, an early childhood development centre and career centre.

**Client:**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),  
Community for Media Development, and Youth for Survival.

**Site:**

Old Native Reception Depot,  
Remainder of Portion 39, Pretoria Townlands 351 JR,  
C/O Es'kia Mphahlele Drive and Johannes Ramokhoase Street,  
Marabastad, Pretoria  
25°44'41"S; 28°10'24"E

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*I further state that no part of this dissertation has already been, or is currently being, submitted for any such degree, diploma or any other qualification.*

*I further declare that this dissertation is substantially my own work. Where reference is made to the works of others, the extent to which that work has been used is indicated and fully acknowledged in the text and list of references.*

*David Ian Hough*

*This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. This opportunity would not have been possible without either of you. I am here because of you.*

*Thank you to my fiancée, Jill. The sacrifices made, emotional support, care and love you selflessly gave provided me the strength and determination to see this through. I couldn't have done it without you.*

*To my brother, Kieran, your help and level-headedness throughout all of this will always be remembered.*

*Nicola and Sandeep, your energy and enthusiasm always brought a smile.*

*Emmanuel, thank you for pushing my inquisitive nature to new levels. Your insights will always guide future pursuits.*

*Arthur, I always enjoyed our entertaining conversations. Thank you for your guidance in developing more critical thoughts. Your continued patience and support will not be forgotten.*

# ABSTRACT

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During 2015 South Africa, a single country with far fewer resources than the EU, had to provide refuge for approximately 72,000 asylum seekers. This global influx of people has been classified as a crisis, placing extreme pressure on the economical, social and urban systems of many cities. Threatened by xenophobia and a bureaucratic legal process, many of these international visitors are treated to a reluctant welcome upon entering South Africa.

In a context such as Marabastad, characterised by urban sprawl, single-use territories and reduced density, exceedingly migratory populations are forced to contend for informal opportunities and sources of survival, often to the detriment of the existing urban fabric. In spite of this, mobile individuals have found a way to situate themselves and organise their surroundings without figurative representation within an urban context scattered with 'ruins' of past utopian ideologies.

Through a recombination of the contradictory facets of architecture, namely fetish and fossil, utopia and ruin, the Vulnerable Asylum investigates the ability of heritage architecture to accommodate new migrant citizens. The resultant architecture offers possibilities in providing an architectural platform for the economies, communities and potentials brought into South Africa by international visitors, incorporating rather than excluding them.

**Key words:**

Marabastad, Old Native Reception Depot, migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, smooth space, striated space, cultural heritage, third space, Dialectical Image, insurgent spatial behaviour.





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# ORIENTING

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*- introduction -*







# 01

introduction

4



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*“And the Black man keeps moving on, as he always has done  
for the last three centuries, moving with baggage and all,  
forever tramping with bent back to give way for the one who  
says he is stronger. The Black dances and sings less and less,  
turning his back on the past and facing the misty horizons,  
moving in a stream that is damned in shifting catchments.”*  
- E’skia Mphahlele quoted in Bremner (2010:16)

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## FRAMING THE EXPEDITION



According to BBC News, 2015 was undoubtedly the year of the migrant, with news reports being beset for months with photographs of large groups seeking refuge in a more hospitable European country, being subjected to mistreatment in some places or given a hesitant reception in others. The European Union classified this influx of people as a crisis, placing extreme pressure on the economic, social and urban systems of many European countries (Rabkin 2015). This crisis was however not only isolated to the confines of the European Union. During 2015, South Africa (a single country with far fewer resources than the EU) had to provide refuge for approximately 72,000 African migrants (ibid).

The advent of democracy has allowed South Africa to benefit from growing unregulated international flows of information, capital and trade as gestures of the new globalisation era. However, the increasing migration patterns seen occurring across local and national borders indicates an area that has not yet been successfully expressed in the South African government's notion of a global future (Gordon 2010: 7).

**Figure 1.1:** Photograph : '3.00 a.m.: Early passengers on the Wolwekraal-Marabastad bus' 1984 Gelatin-silver print  
Museum no. Ph.65-1987 (Source: David Goldblatt, adapted by Author, 2016).

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## Stowaways

*framing the issue*

Marabastad, Pretoria has become an area synonymous with the qualities of a vacuum border state (Jacobs 1992:259). The insertion of utopian architectural artefacts throughout the historical development of the area together with forced removals and segregation policies of the apartheid government have led to urban sprawl, single-use territories and reduced density. Here, exceedingly migratory populations strive to discover sources of survival within an area of limited opportunities.

Furthermore, the habits of designers to transpose fluid, indefinite and historically unique occurrences into a-historical containers of predetermined permanence have reduced urban life in African cities to the dystopian ordeal of spatial incoherence, overcrowding, decay, crime, and pollution (Bremner 2010:72). These abstractions, together with the historical methods of restriction, intimidation and restraint set out by South African migration laws, render both local and international migrants, especially 'black' Africans, vulnerable to unemployment, violence and corruption (Gordon 2010:8).

According to projections from the Department of Home Affairs (n.d.), migratory population groups will continue to constitute a significant role on the culture, history and economy of our cities, presenting a reality that is required to be perceived and confronted through the tool of

architecture (Herzog and de Meuron 1988).

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## Fluidity

*ventures of the past*

The themes of fluid, mobile, uncertain and historically specific spatial practices are not unique to African cities and architecture (Bremner 2010:63). From the 1970s onwards, many spatial theorists including Ed Soja, Manuel Castells, and Frederic Jameson have noted that contemporary means of city-shaping and architectural investigation should be aimed at resolving uncertainty, fluctuations, and ambiguity (Body-Gendrot and Beauregard 1999).

Numerous social and spatial attributes based on differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age and income have resulted in a new regime of global urbanisation (Soja 2002:299). Ever-increasing points of contention, broadening economic and social imbalance, and unparalleled cultural differences indicate a unique new method of urbanisation. These extraordinary means of spatial production, linked to increasing global connectivity, have advanced the dispersal and disruption of cities, leading to a point where existing processes of thinking of and defining space no longer make sense.

Thoughts on cities as migrant, flowing landscapes of interconnected scales and intangible relationships were first expressed in architectural theory by Christopher

Alexander (Bremner 2010:67). He argued that the conceptualisation of space as a single hierarchically arranged configuration could not allow for circumstance, overlap or continuity. Spaces, and the cities they occur in, should become vessels of heterogeneous life.

When contemplating spatial production within postmodern and modern cities, David Harvey, a British geographer, developed the theoretical view of the “time-space” compression (Tally 2013:28). Here, the revolutionised objective qualities of space and time, through the processes of capitalisation, have compelled us to adjust the way in which we represent the world to ourselves, often in unimagined ways.

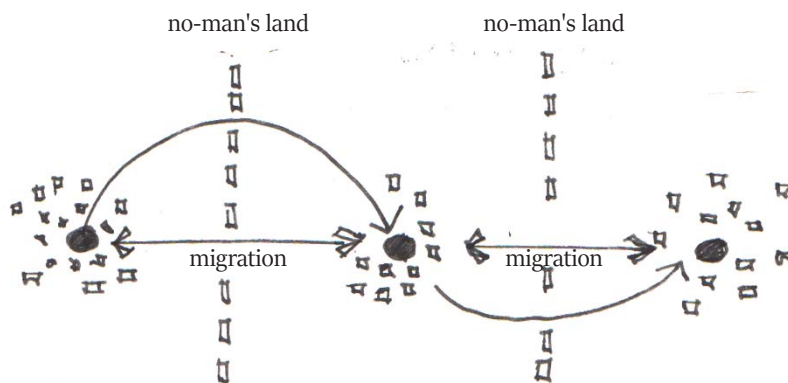
Most recently in South Africa, urban and architectural enquiry have been revitalised and transformed by social theory from the late 1970s onwards (Bremner 2010:65). Drawing from French theorists such as de Certeau and Lefebvre, new possibilities have been imagined, from street level, into a alternate mode of responding to urban spaces and practices of everyday rituals. The formulation of ‘Everyday Urbanism’ begins to disintegrate the structure/agency dichotomy, promoting the urban field as a space that is written or figured by culturally and socially complex interactions with the built environment (ibid).

## Jetsam

*deficiencies*

Western inquiries into African cities, mentioned above, have usually started from ideal-typical methods of ‘normal urbanisation’. Here, when tested against the notions of modernisation and development, African architecture is found defective, most often resulting in prescriptive policy recommendations geared towards meeting immediate needs.

As analytical bodies of work, originating from Europe and North America, these means of tackling architecture in a fluid and migrant landscape overlook the intricacy and heterogeneity of African urbanism (Drakakis-Smith 2000:10). As such, African architecture declines to materialise into an object of investigation in its own right, but rather exist as an unrepresented and under theorised (Bremner 2010:73) entity.



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**Figure 1.2** (top): Aerial photograph indicating a vacuum border state (Department of Geography, GIS, University of Pretoria, adapted by Author, 2016).

**Figure 1.3** (bottom): Diagram of the sprawl condition typical of urbanisation in Pretoria (Author, 2016).



## Bountiful Discoveries

*possibilities*

The reality of contemporary architecture should no longer, not only, be the unity of the built form. It should become an object of perception; research without the demand for progress, an autonomous reality. Architectural accomplishment should be discovered in fulfilling unstable roles of widening horizons, inciting radical aspirations and effecting unimagined ingenuity rather than the seductive reproduction of global best-practice answers. Architecture and architects must convince their audiences that the answer should not simply be to solve basic needs but to re-address the ideas of needs themselves (Clear et al. 2009: 243).

## Discovering new citizens

*main issue and intention*

The intention of this dissertation is to investigate a means of reducing the vulnerability of migratory populations within a typically hostile and foreign region, city, or section of a city. Through promoting access to safety and security as well as opportunities of employment, trade, shelter and services, the aim is to restore migrants as active citizens, exposing them to the economic and social resources afforded by their new homes.

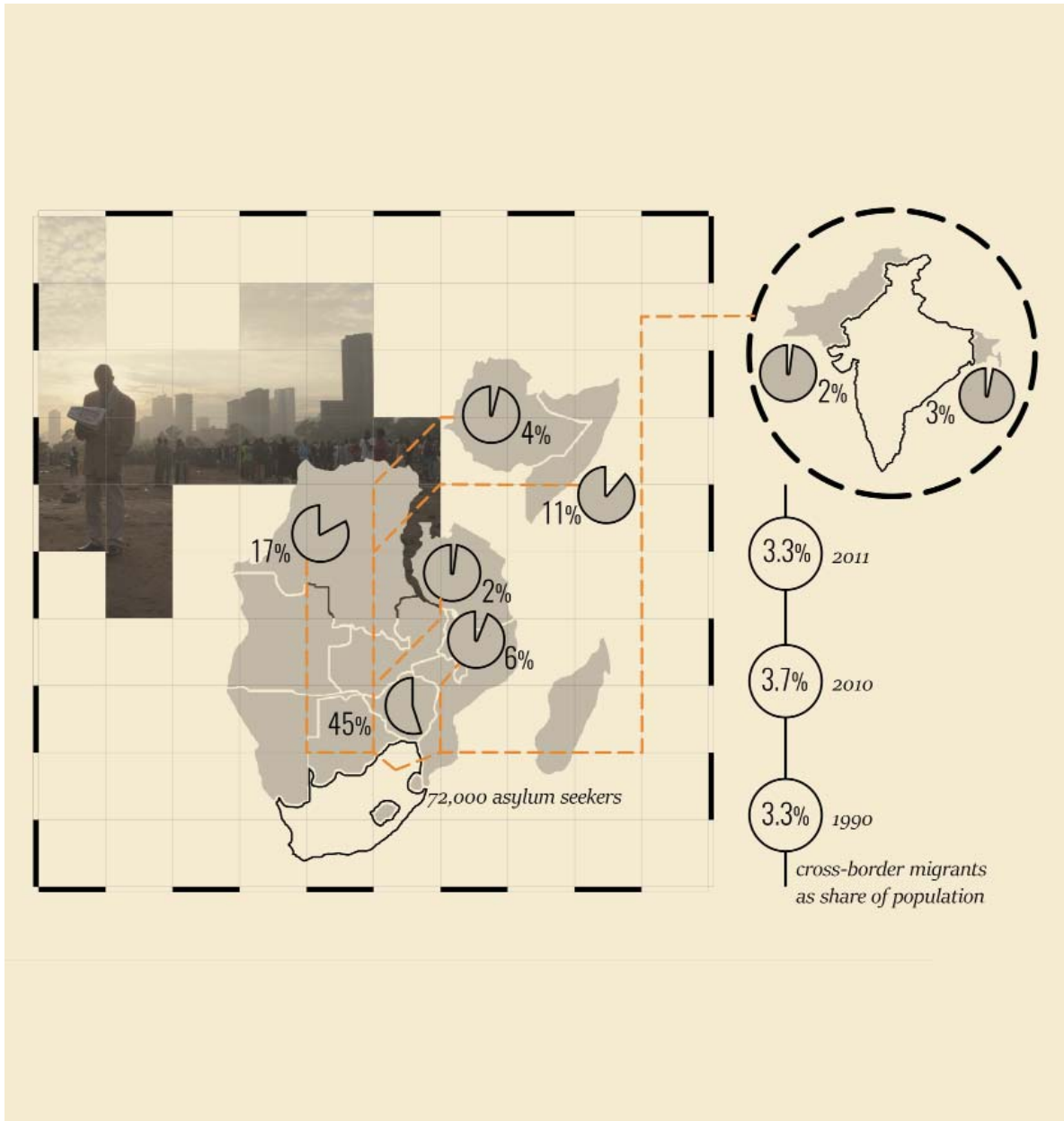
## Discovering new lands

*urban issue and intention*

The multitude of informal activities which populate the area of Marabastad define an urban space in which numerous communities subsist and contend for opportunities and resources often to the detriment of the urban fabric. In this postmodern hyperspace (Tally 2013:2), occupants have seemingly overcome the capacities of the individual human being to situate themselves, and have organised their surroundings without the means of figurative representation, coming to terms with the peculiarities of space and place through social formations and individual interpretations.

Centred on existing “ruins” of utopia, these informal activities have led to an insurgent spatial behaviour (Holsten 1999: 39) where the urban realm becomes a “chronique” (Foucault 1984: 7), hosting new unimagined spatial arrangements that add to the layering of time upon the built environment.

The aim of the urban investigation is to enhance the insurgent spatial behaviour surrounding these “ruins” of utopia as an opportunity to utilise the associated informal energy as a method of conserving and condensing the memory, history and culture of Marabastad. An urban vision that focuses on these aspects intends to establish new energy flows through the insertion of “insurgent capacitors” at important intersections, thus promoting an incremental strategy of increasing



11 | **Figure 1.4:** The extent of cross-border migration experienced in South Africa (Author, 2016).

density and promoting mixed uses within the area.

### Discovering new techniques

*architectural issue and intention*

The South African built environment is still dominantly defined and conceptualized by the same historical processes and control mechanisms of colonial thinking which tend to fail as top-down standardised approaches which overlook the complexities of social processes (Murray & Myers 2006:51). Buildings are designed to be inhabited by occupants with endless capital reserves in a striving economic position.

The intention of the architectural exploration is to investigate a new method of architectural intervention capable of being implemented and sustained with minimal capital from motile communities who do not necessarily have the time, money or inclination to develop architecture into place. Here, the aim is to scrutinize extending the use of existing building stock or “ruins” by exposing latent potential and generating new multifunctional programmes that address the needs of the migrant community through a new spatial cartography which is open, connectible and detachable. This susceptibility to modification will allow for the necessary conditions to include the unintended and unforeseeable as sources of new interpretation (Holston 1999: 47).

Through the use of Walter Benjamin’s ‘Dialectic Image’ as a tool of analysis and conception, the resultant architecture will attempt to achieve a balance between the contradictory ‘faces’: fetish and fossil; utopia and ruin, (Buck-Morss 1989:117). The resultant architecture, through ‘technification’, will attempt to reduce the vulnerability of said architecture to climatic change and economic downturn. By exploring an architecture of exchange, the design intent aims to secure the role of buildings in accommodating and enhancing informal energy as a means of opportunity within a migrant society.

### Navigational tools

*research methodology*

The study will undertake an extensive mapping exercise, through site visits, to ascertain the quality and extent of social networks between migrant and informal communities. This mapping exercise will not only serve to identify differing aspirations and identities of external communities but also provide informants of possible generative programmatic possibilities, thus reducing dependency on external investment sources.

In-depth literature studies of the ‘Dialectic Image’, Tally’s postmodern hyperspace, and additional writings on migrant spatial behaviours, will identify an appropriate spatial cartography as a means of insertion within existing buildings. Additionally, an extensive understanding of

local and international architectural heritage legislation will be required in order to gain perspective on an appropriate technique of architectural intervention.

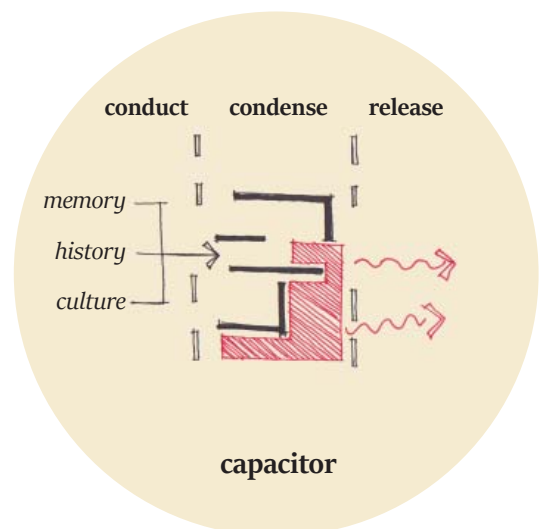
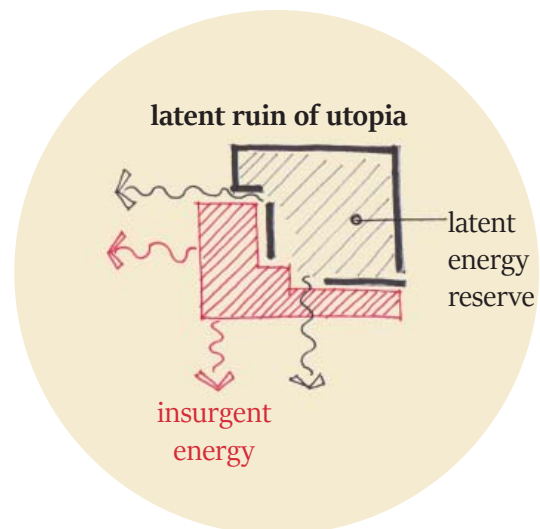
Case studies (technical, form-making, and theoretical) will be employed to provide an insight to previous schemes of spatial reconfiguration and the resultant architectural method will be documented and tested through the exploration of tectonic expressions. Through an iterative testing process, the study intends to evaluate various technical configurations with environmental rating tools to achieve the most optimal suggestions for minimising the extent of embodied investment (embodied energy, embodied water and capital outlay) within the resulting structure.

### Bearings

*delimitations*

People live in and move into cities to experience the benefits of economic, social, cultural and recreational opportunities presented through the physical massing of people within the urban realm (Dewar and Uytenbogaardt 1991:16). However, migrants are most often faced with numerous threats in establishing a new home within South African cities.

Legal restrictions enforced by policy; poor housing distribution; as well as xenophobic discrimination, all threaten the legitimacy of migratory groups as contributory citizens.



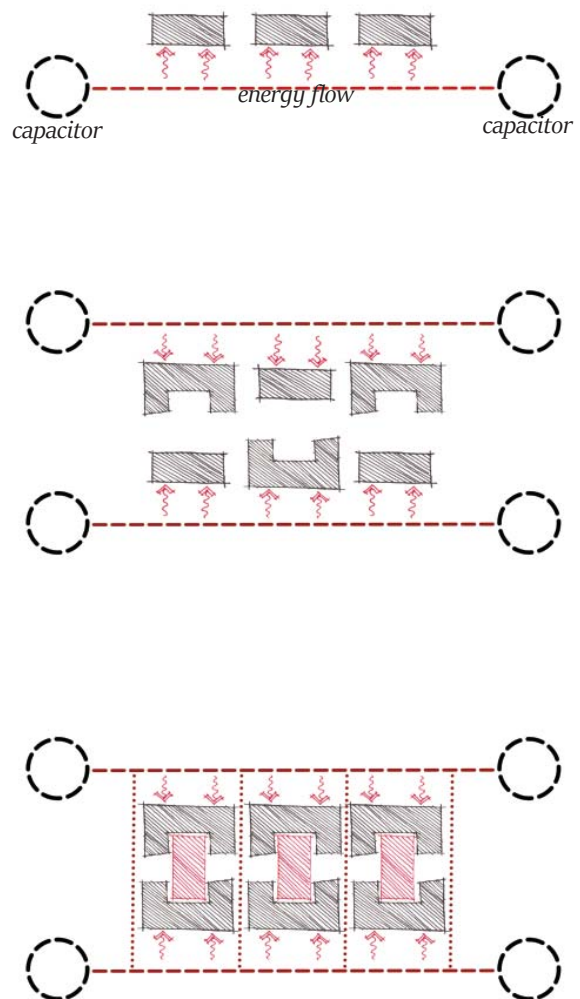
13 | **Figure 1.5** (top): Diagram indicating the latent and insurgent energies associated with ‘ruins’ of utopia (adapted from Holston, 1999 by Author, 2016).  
**Figure 1.6** (bottom): Diagram illustrating the intention of an energy capacitor (adapted from Holston, 1999 by Author, 2016).



Furthermore, the vulnerability of these groups is exacerbated by limited healthcare provision, unemployment, corruption or exploitation, and deportation (Gordon 2010:11).

In order to delimit the study, the resultant architectural investigation, as a manifestation of cultural expression, will focus on restoring and advocating migrant communities and individuals as integral members of society by:

- defining a receptive environment that is sensitive to the existing heritage,
- promoting and enhancing tacit skills and knowledge of different individuals,
- exposing individual migrants to established information and social networks or communities, and
- documenting and celebrating the untold memories and narratives of migrants.



**Figure 1.7:** Diagram indicating the envisioned incremental development surrounding insurgent capacitors (Author, 2016).