

# 6

## THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theory component to this dissertation is focused on defining what public architecture is and can be. This will be in an urban scale and a local scale. Together with this, the aspirations that one can achieve through public architecture will be discussed as well as the idea of a shared identity through public architecture.

## 6.1 URBAN PUBLIC SPACE\_ OUR “AFRICANESS” AND OUR SPATIAL LEGACY

With the coming of democracy in 1994, South Africa changed from being a European colonial outpost to being an African country ruled by black Africans (Steyn 2008: 42). The new leaders have their own set of ideals, goals and aspirations which differed from previous leaders. With this new change, one would try and disregard the past in search of a future but one must consider the colonial history of South Africa and the fact that it should not be erased but recognised as a reality. This poses a question of what “Africaness” is in the context of South Africa with its colonial history. A deep understanding of context needs to occur. The design of the urban spaces should respond to the demographic legacies present in South Africa. This could give architecture the potential to mediate these factors and have the ability to reflect the idea of “Africaness”.

The apartheid spatial legacy left a scar in

the South African landscape. This should not be ignored as it would be the same as ignoring the events that brought South Africa as well as negate the consequences of these events. The question then is, how does architecture address the spatial scarring left by South Africa’s past in a manner that not only acknowledges it but also attempts to re-imagine the urban space beyond its current condition. Steyn (2008) speaks of a good architecture being able to firstly address the African identity and its intertwined legacy heritage together with South Africa’s European and Asian heritage and secondly an architecture that responds to the physical, natural, social-political and historical context. This poses a difficulty for large scale civic buildings as they have to address a larger audience as opposed to a dwelling or a house.

Steyn (2008) suggests that that characteristics that could render the environment

African, are firstly the way our streets are occupied by hawkers and traders and secondly, the way informal settlements are shaped and inhabited. These are principles one could use to derive an appropriate architecture, an architecture that replaces the notion of a building as an isolated object in space and rather as a building that encourages connectivity of people to the built environment and social spaces to encourage better relationships among people.

The understanding of what an African urban space may be is very much dependant on the context in which one works in. Architecture should respond to the conditions it is presented with, whether they are physical, social, political or economic and this will change radically from site to site. In the case of this dissertation, the context deals with a community with a majority disadvantaged black people.

## 6.2 PUBLIC SPACE\_ THE GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD

European cities such as Barcelona and Paris have better designed public spaces, spaces that are not as celebrated in the South African context. South African cities have not had the same opportunity to have public spaces that can evoke feelings of pride and ownership. If one looks at the way in which RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing has been supplied in South African townships, the focus was on merely providing housing to meet the goals set out by the RDP and later the GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) strategy (Wehner 2000). This has created communities whose need for housing are being satisfied but in manner that deprives them of a quality life. These settlements are placed even further away from places of employment and economic opportunities and are created without providing the basic amenities needed by a community. This re-occurring practise perpetuates the spatial inequality experienced by many in the

Apartheid era. That is not to say that there are not any spaces afforded to the public, they just so happen to be organic in inception and growth. The African market is such a space and is discussed below.

### 6.2.1 The African space

There are major differences between the European and African perspectives of space. Lloyd (2003) highlights the European perception of space being private except for spaces that are specifically labelled as being public or for public use. Africans on the other hand perceive all space as being public except for spaces reserved for rituals or events which are designated as being private (Lloyd 2003: 107). This distinction shows clearly the different mind sets one may have when it comes to space depending on one's heritage. With this lens, the African market space and the street have the potential to become important components to the formation of new public spaces.



Figure 55: African public and private space [Diptych of a street market in Soweto on the left and a menstruation hut in Sangha on the right] (Adapted by Author 2016).



Figure 56: European private and public spaces. [Piazza della Signoria on the left and a Suburb in Colorado Springs on the right] (Adapted by Author 2016).

“The African market space is a terribly contested space, with vendors occupying a major portion of the side walk, often forcing customers and passers-by to share the street with taxis” (Steyn 2008: 159). An informal settlement can be characterised by the ever bustling street edge which affords the traders economic sustenance and the community with a lively and ever changing public realm. A large number of residents in Mamelodi still rely on walking as a mode of transport. This solidifies the importance of the street as a public realm but also the nature of most African public spaces being linear. The adaptation of the linear public realm is an important design driver for this study and will be the first element implemented and of which the design project will continue from.

### 6.2.2 The public architecture

Graham (2006) questions whether there can be public architecture. If architecture can be considered public, then it has to satisfy certain conditions. Graham (2006: 247-248) suggests that the architecture must both serve and give spatial expressions to the functions that members of society can appropriate. That means the architecture; the spaces around buildings and the function of said architecture, should not exclude any member of society. Therefore architecture will not merely become public because it was made for the public but that its functions can be appropriated by its users without exclusion.



Figure 57: Street edge activity [Hector Peterson road in Lusaka, Mamelodi] (Author 2016).

Aspirations in South Africa drive the individual in how and what they do. Success becomes an aspiration and, more importantly, the symbol of success which people aspire for. These architectural symbols of prosperity in the form of house styles can be seen in most suburbs located in East of Pretoria. This is why the built environment is scattered with Tuscan styled houses (Steyn 2008). This is the architecture that people in informal settlements and RDP settlements aspire towards. It is a style that is synonymous with economic growth and prosperity. This is not only true to the lower income home owners, but also to the middle and higher income homeowners. It begs the question whether one should really judge the taste that many agreed upon.

### 6.3.1 The vernacular

If one is to be inspired by the vernacular, one needs to understand what the vernacular is in a post-Apartheid society. As Steyn (2008) states that vernacular is not a style but a tool, a tool where design principles similar to those associated with critical regionalism can be learned and used to design appropriate architecture. That means there is value in the shack dwellings, in their materials and in their urban form and layout.



Figure 58: Informal settlement patterns and dwellings as lessons in rationalistic design [Alaska, Mamelodi] (Author 2016).

One has to be careful in such a context to not patronise a disadvantaged community by imitating their architecture as a means of creating an environment that they will find familiar and can associate with. Projects that aim to imitate the use of local materials, construction methods and technologies tend to be viewed as backwards and negatively received by a community as they see it as a ploy by the architect to mock their poverty (Steyn 2008: 50-51).

Therefore, the designer in this sense has the responsibility of synthesising the aspirations of a collective and the characteristics that make a built environment unique and function well. An appropriate building in this context will therefore engage with its physical context, its climate, its accessibility and its public space (Steyn 2008: 53) rather than being solely determined historicism.

This dissertation is about celebrating the public realm by appropriating spaces for daily rituals that form part of their life. It is suggested that an appropriated civic function should be applied to a community's needs. The civic service should then be placed in the public realm so as to foster a relationship between the architecture, the community and the public realm. The architecture then becomes the background upon which the relationship is played out and therefore the architecture takes the backseat and the rituals of the 'everyday' (figure 59-61) in the 'everyday space' becomes paramount. The architecture should be a manifestation of contextual characteristics, economic realities, existential necessities, aspirations and choice. This is a search for an appropriate architecture and for social equity.



Figure 59: An existing church found on site. Religion forms a part of the daily rituals on the site (Author 2016).



Figure 60: Soccer match on Victory soccer field [Lusaka, Mamelodi] (Author 2016).



**Figure 61:**Market spaces where people socialise an earn a living [Lusaka, Mamelodi] (Author 2016).



