



CHAPTER

02

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Understanding the contemporary issue of institutional
placelessness through theoretical discourse and literature.



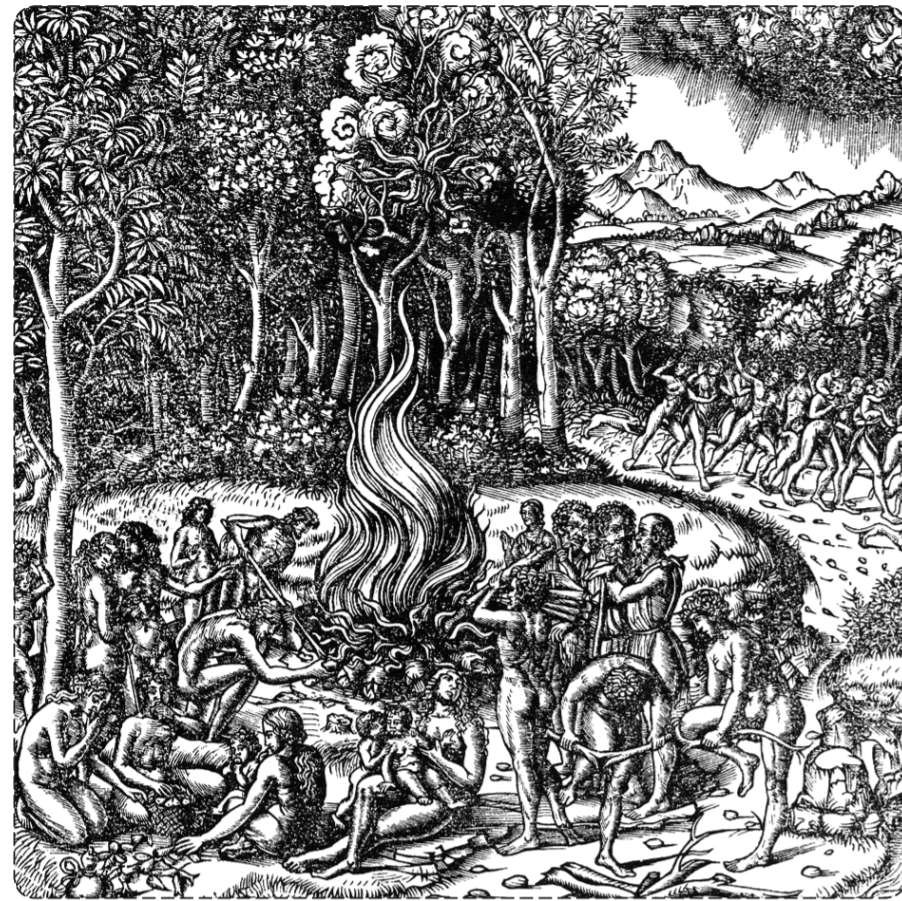


Figure 2.1 - Place

Figure 2.2 - Placelessness

2.1

PLACE

The term place is used to describe an anthropological version of space (Auge 1995:78), where space refers to the abstract and neutral realm of location, co-ordinates and dimensions. Place is a specific point within this void that is charged with significance and meaning (Jordaan 2015:1). Although this qualitative and somewhat elusive phenomenon is impossible to simplify, abstract or reduce into quantifiable parts (Norberg-Schulz 1976:414), multiple writers on the subject concur that the essence of place is a sense of enclosure created by the existence of an inside and an outside, separated by boundary (Harries 1997, Jordaan 2015, Relph 1976, Zumthor 2006).

2.2

PLACELESSNESS

In contrast to place, placelessness is a condition where spaces exist void of meaning and cultural value, capable of only facilitating mediocre lived experiences and denying the possibility of true dwelling or appropriation. Ubiquitous in its universality, the proliferation of placelessness depends on the eradication of existing places *replacing* them with a homogenous, predictable landscape (Relph 1976) which may provide all of the requirements for the physical body to flourish, but condemns the spirit to wither (Harries 1997).

2.3

CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONS

Norberg-Schulz (1976:415) argues that specific actions require specific atmospheres or places within which to occur in order to facilitate a satisfactory experience of the action. With this understanding of the importance of experience in relation to place, and because any institutional space will illicit an experience from those within it, the issue is not whether an experience will occur but rather the quality of the experience (Jordaan 2015:187). Therefore, the issue of institutional placelessness would best be investigated through the lens of an institution best suited to facilitate a sense of appropriation and ownership from the public rather than one of control and restriction. From this understanding, the public library was chosen as the ideal institution for investigation due to the fact that users are not confined to public waiting areas as in courthouses, police stations, post offices and hospitals, but are rather required to engage with the institution's collections, giving them free access to the majority of the institution's spaces. Furthermore, the public library necessitates the exploration and casual browsing of these spaces in order for one to meaningfully access its content. By comparison, the controlled collections of the library's sister institutions, the museum and the art gallery (Pickard 2002:4), rely on the curated and choreographed experiences offered by guided tours and maps in order to be meaningfully accessed. As a means of developing a deeper understanding of the nature of institutional placelessness and determining the spatial manifestations of such a condition, three public libraries that were initially perceived as exhibiting qualities of placelessness were critically analysed in terms of the qualities of their material form, public use and spatial experience. Chosen for their diversity of scales, contexts and users, the three libraries are the National library of South Africa branch in Pretoria, the Sandton Public Library and the Brooklyn Community Library.

2.2.1 - INSTITUTIONAL PLACELESSNESS

The species of placelessness that defines public institutions is, according to Relph (1976:118), characteristic of architecture designed with the aspiration of reflecting an international style. Driven by a fear of nationalism and a distrust of the state following the devastation of the Second World War, the rationality, economy and anonymity of the International Style promised for Europe the possibility for self-actualisation separate from the influences of the past. In South Africa, International Style Modernism came to represent the state during the Apartheid regime as the preferred (but not the only) style for governmental and administrative buildings thanks to its perceived independence and lack of overt references to the architectural traditions of Continental Europe and the British Isles. This relationship also made it an appropriate architectural expression for the many public institutions built during the Apartheid regime due to their role as an indirect interface between the public and the state. As a legacy of its historically privileged position, the tenets of the international style still hold prodigious influence

over the architectural discipline today. As a result, an architectural tradition of generating placeless institutional spaces has been well established in South Africa, an ongoing condition that needs to be rectified if architecture is to hold any kind of cultural relevance moving forward (Verschaffel 2009). The particular form of placelessness generated by this tradition is one of standardisation and homogeneity driven by utilitarian and economic concerns (Relph 1976:118), a condition that denies the possibility for people to meaningfully relate to and associate with their surroundings (Buchanan 2012:7). Public institutional architecture in South Africa, both contemporary and historical, can often be characterised by endless corridors, homogenous rooms, anonymous materials and the pervasive cool glow of fluorescent lights. This condition of the generic dominates the architectural expression of institutional building types regardless of their functional and contextual specificities, a condition that not only alienates those whom the institution serves but also limits the institutions ability to effectively perform its functional role (Norberg-Schulz 1976:415).



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2.3.1

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SOUTH AFRICA

ARCHITECT :

Jeremie Malan Architects and Interiors

LOCATION OF PROJECT	DATE OF COMPLETION	REASON FOR INCLUSION
Corner of Struben Street and Thabo Sehume Street (formerly Andries), Pretoria Inner City, South Africa	2008	Example of the kind of placelessness created by contemporary architectural trends

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Built as a cultural icon for the city of Pretoria and imagined as the most technologically advanced library on the African continent, the monumental structure covers half a city block and provides enough space to accommodate up to 4000 visitors per day. The architecture of the new National Library exhibits several qualities that, according to Relp (1976:118-119), define it as placeless. Yet despite proliferating a condition of institutional placelessness, the building apparently still upholds the current values of the architectural discipline due to the fact that it was celebrated as a fine example of contemporary South African architecture with a PIA Award of Excellence in 2009.

Although it responds appropriately to the urban context and has a recognisable character from the exterior, once within, the memorability of the library quickly fades away. Due to a lack of spatial variation and recognisability, the library's interiors are impossible to navigate without signage. Interior volumes are excessively large and cavernous (presumably in the attempt to evoke awe from the user), with scattered clusters of furniture floating within these great voids. The materials used to finish these volumes are draped on, like a veneer, and used to communicate the library's 'theme' of technological advancement and sophistication. Concrete, polished stone tiles, glass, steel, stained timber and arbitrarily patterned

Figure 2.3 - National Library locality plan



Figure 2.4 - Library foyer or airport terminal?



carpets make up a 'fruit salad' of high-end interior materials which have all been finished to appear smooth or flat. African themed patterns and literary motifs have also been superficially applied to interior walls in an unsuccessful attempt to give the project a cultural relevance and functional legibility. The themed nature of the National Library along with its exaggerated size and generic architectural

quality characterises it as an example of contemporary institutional placelessness. This, along with its quotidian detailing, standard fittings and predictable spaces, has denied the possibility for meaningful appropriation from the public and created an edifice that could just as easily be mistaken for a large conference centre or airport terminal.



Figure 2.5 - Themed decorative panels

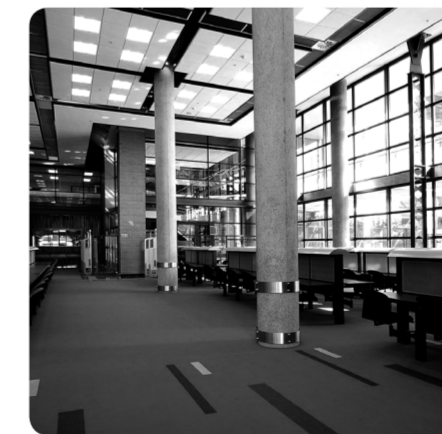


Figure 2.6 - Inhumane scale of interior volumes



Figure 2.7 - Urban presence of the library



Figure 2.8 - The manifestation of placelessness

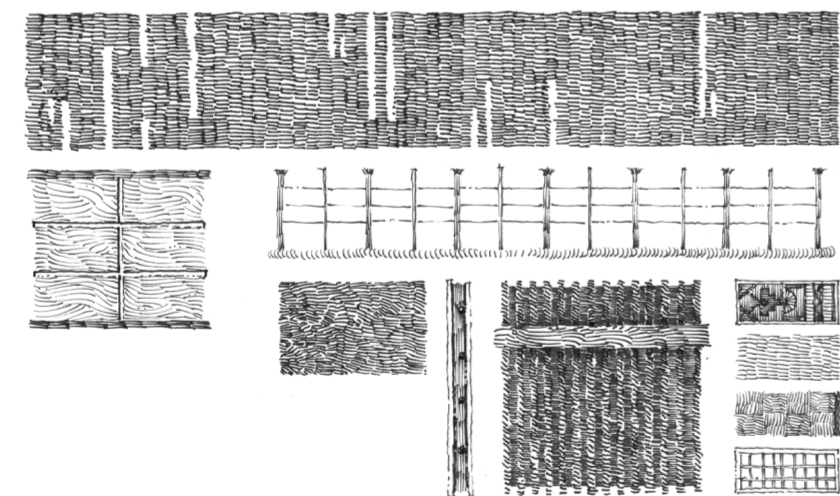


Figure 2.9 - Fruit salad of generic materials and fittings

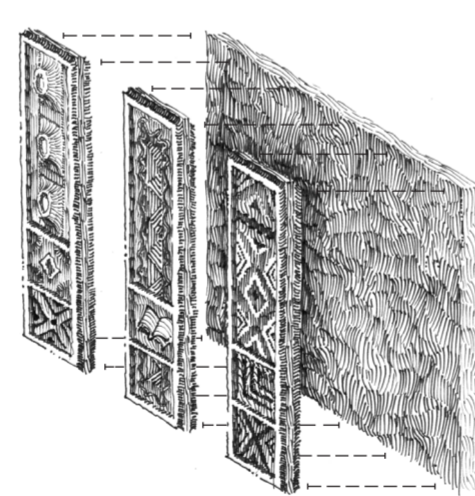


Figure 2.10 - Superficially applied ornamentation

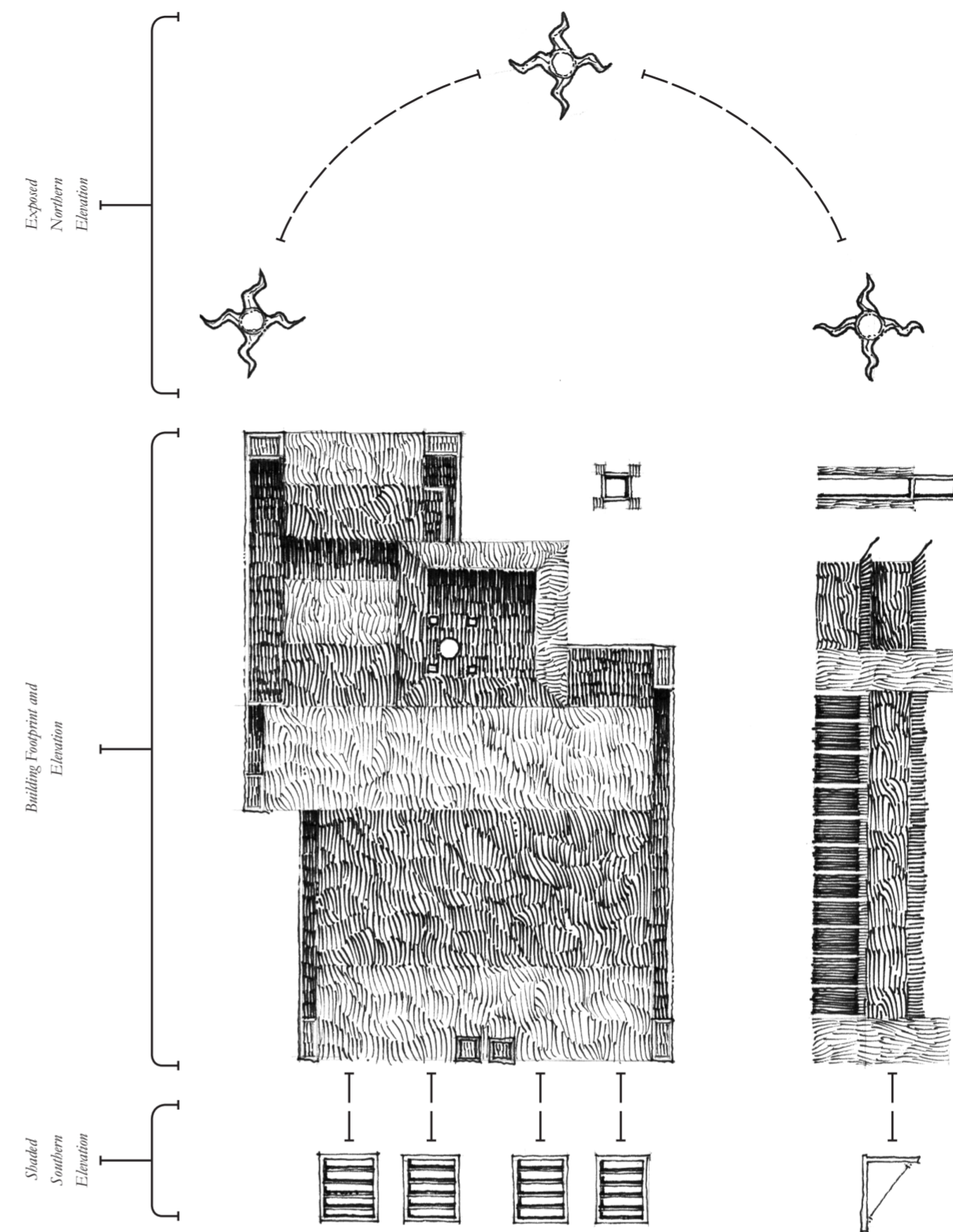


Figure 2.11 - Decorative solar 'protection'

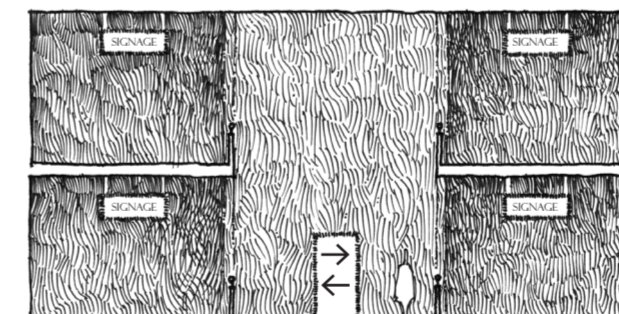


Figure 2.12 - Impossibility to navigate without signage

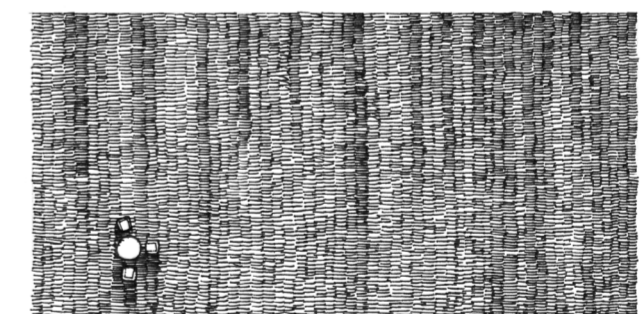


Figure 2.13 - Furnishings float in 'ocean' of open space



2.3.2

THE SANDTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

ARCHITECT :

GAPP Architects and Urban Designers

LOCATION OF PROJECT	DATE OF COMPLETION	REASON FOR INCLUSION
Nelson Mandela Square at Sandton City, Johannesburg, South Africa	1995	A scheme that exhibits qualities of both place and placelessness

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Defining one of the edges of the Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton City, The Sandton Public Library is a medium to large library that exemplifies the fact that not all the characteristics of place and placelessness are mutually exclusive and that a single institutional building can exhibit qualities of both simultaneously. Critical analysis reveals that the Sandton Public Library is primarily a place that exhibits qualities of placelessness despite it being initially perceived only as placeless. The characteristics that define it as a place are its recognisable and contextually responsive civic presence, the fact that its institutional interiors are separated from the commercial exterior by a clear boundary and that once within, the encompassing presence of books lends the place a functional legibility and communicates its civic role. By contrast, the placelessness of the building is defined by the fact that its civic presence is undermined by having the façade that fronts the square plastered with screens and billboards for advertising meaning that the architecture loses its recognisability and the institutions importance is eroded. Within the interior, although there are a variety of different library functions, there is a lack of spatial variation within and despite the library's unique character, one's experience of the interior quickly becomes repetitive, predictable and homogeneous.

Figure 2.14 - Sandton Library locality plan

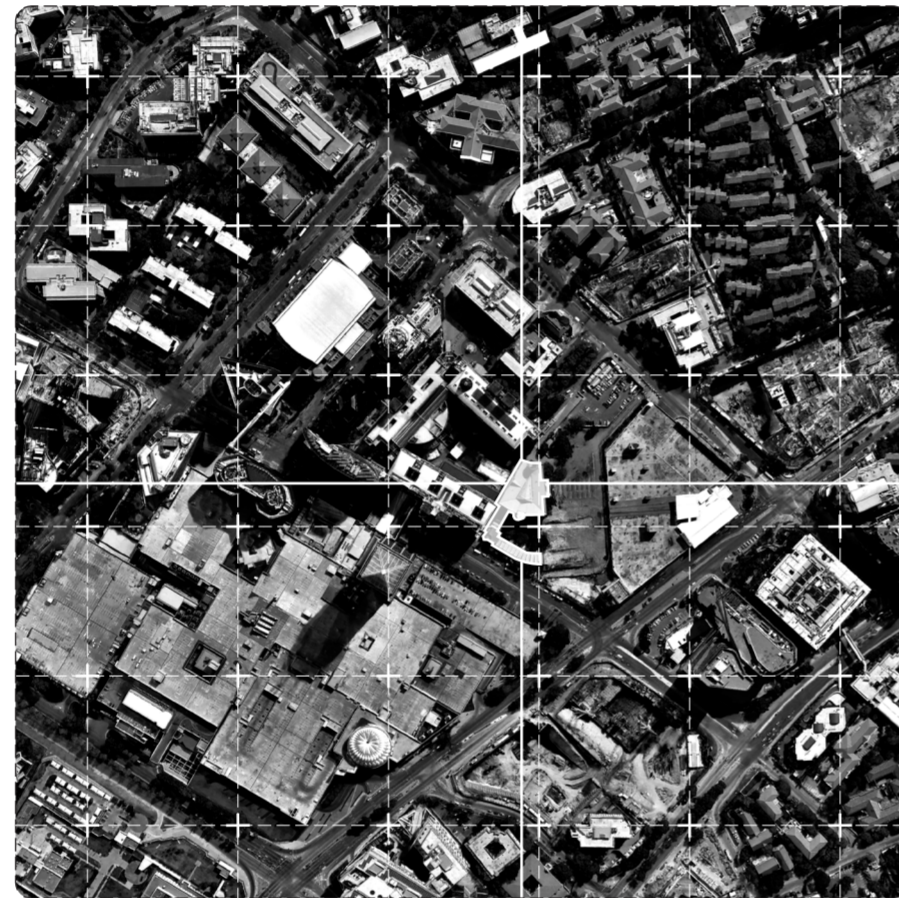


Figure 2.15 - One of the library's many lounges

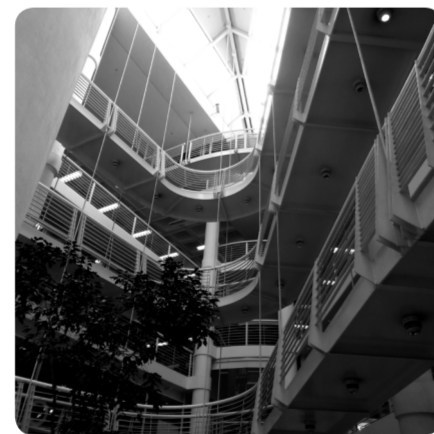


Figure 2.16 - Central ramp and foyer



Figure 2.17 - Unused central lounge

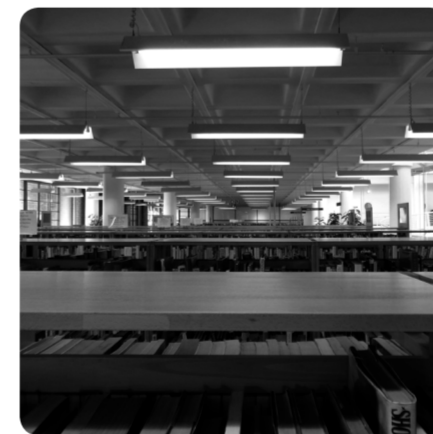


Figure 2.18 - Low, expansive ceiling plane



Figure 2.19 - Custom yet repetitive fittings

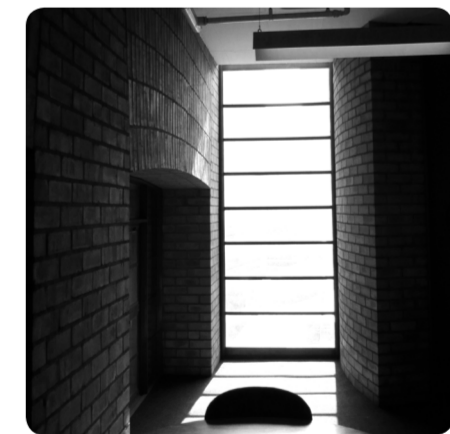


Figure 2.20 - Connection to the outside

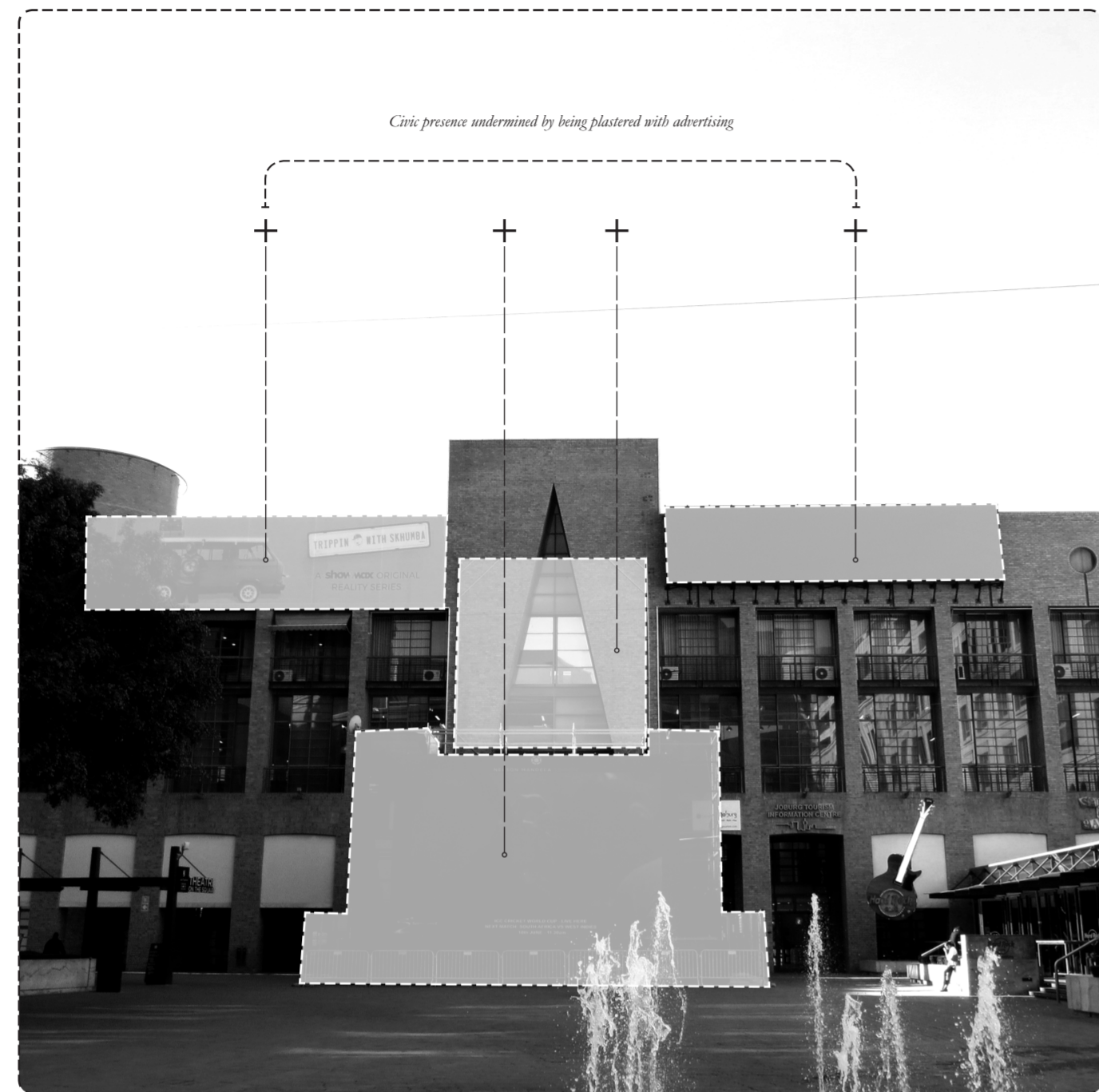


Figure 2.21 - Civic presence of the library

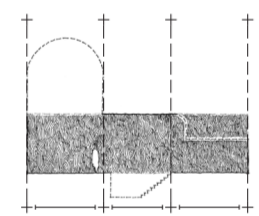


Figure 2.22 - Lack of internal spatial variation

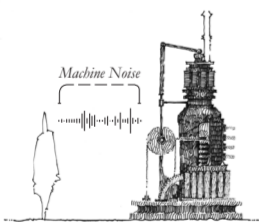


Figure 2.23 - Constant machine noise within

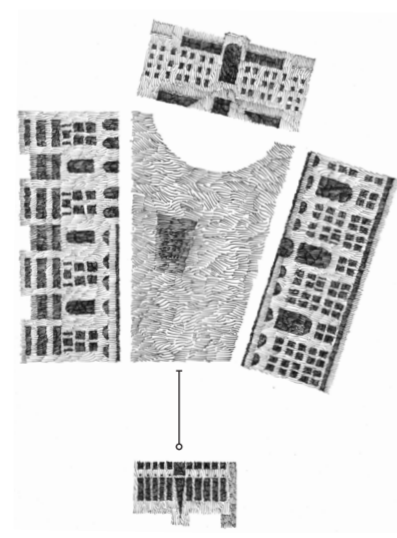


Figure 2.24 - Library's role in the square ensemble

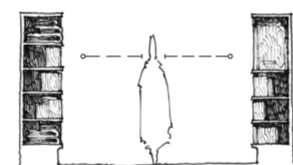


Figure 2.25 - functional legibility from codices

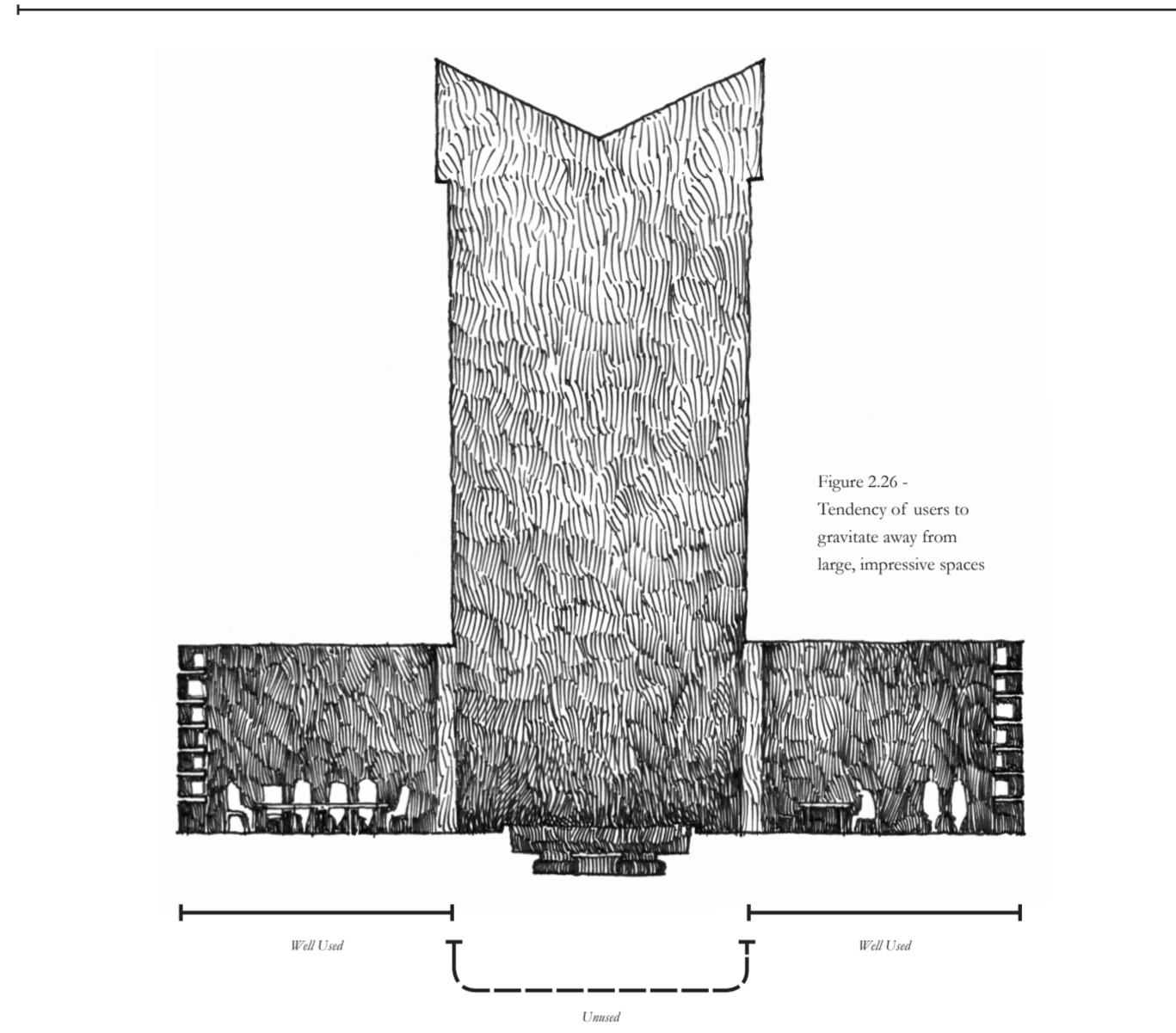
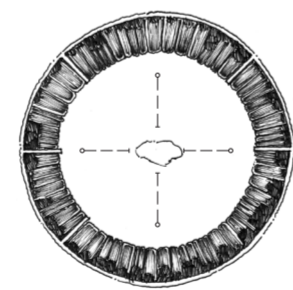


Figure 2.26 - Tendency of users to gravitate away from large, impressive spaces

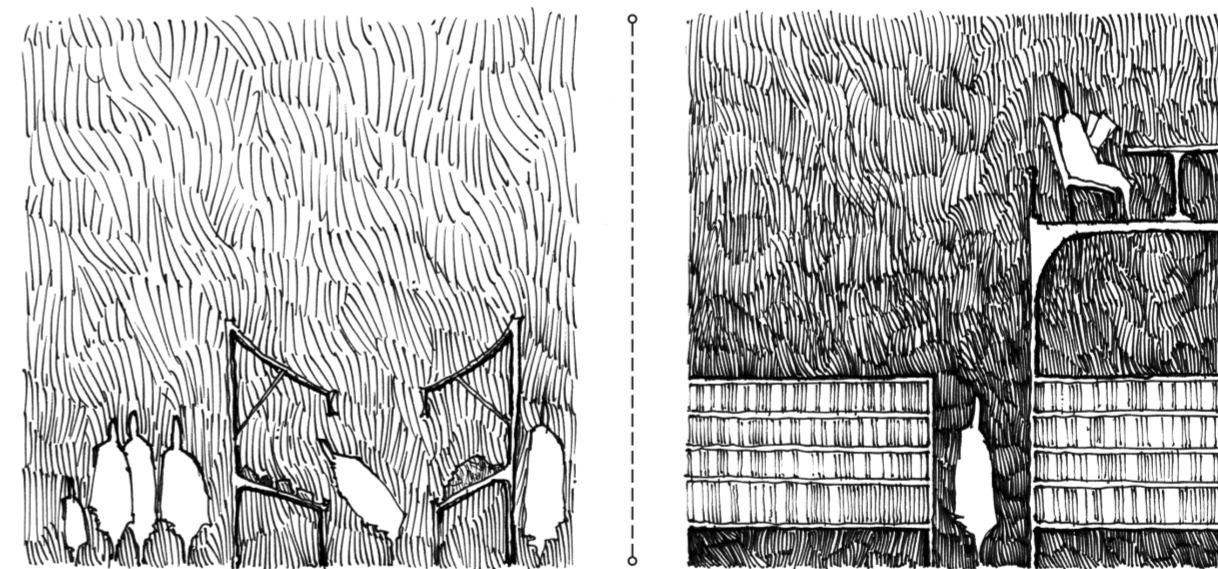


Figure 2.27 - Clear distinction between the inner realm of the library and the outer realm of the square



2.3.3

THE BROOKLYN COMMUNITY LIBRARY

ARCHITECT :

Unknown - developed by Atterbury Properties

LOCATION OF PROJECT	DATE OF COMPLETION	REASON FOR INCLUSION
Design Square at Brooklyn Mall, Pretoria, South Africa	2013	Exemplary of the most common type of institutional placelessness

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Brooklyn community library is part of a sparse network of public libraries that serve Pretoria's communities on a neighbourhood level. It occupies a shop next to Brooklyn Mall's Design Square rather than its own building. Both a community library and of a similar size to the public library designed for this dissertation, the Brooklyn Community Library acts as an important example for critical analysis, not only for its similarities to this scheme but also because it is typical of the most common variety of institutional placelessness found in South Africa. Behind a nondescript shop-front just off the edge of the busy Design Square, the library acts as any other anonymous and ill frequented shop within the mall. Undermining the autonomy and civic importance of the library as an institution, it is subservient to the greater commercial space of the mall, lacking any kind of relationship to the nearby semi-public square as well as any kind of distinguishing architectural character that communicates its function. Instead, the library relies on signage designed and printed by its staff to announce itself and communicate its rules to the public. The interior of the library shares the exterior's lack of character and defining features. Uncompromisingly generic and economically conscious, the library occupies a single room enclosed by smooth mint green walls, standard acoustic ceiling tiles, fluorescent lights and a carpeted floor, shelving and

Figure 2.28 - Brooklyn Library locality plan

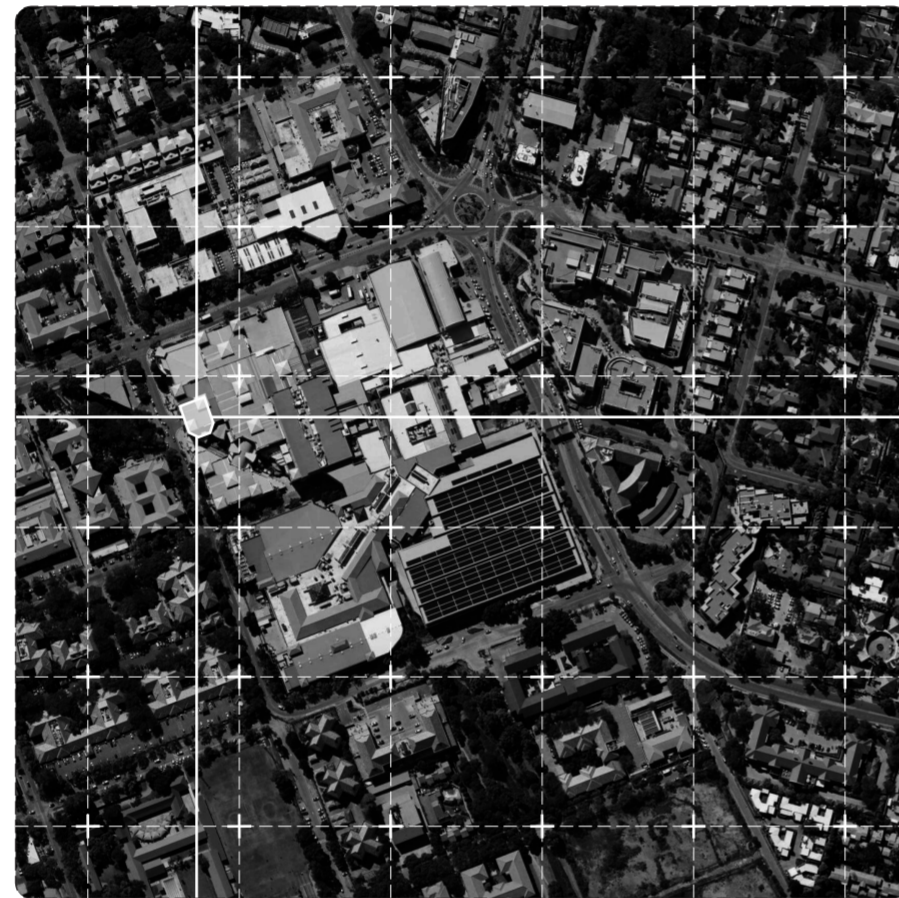


Figure 2.29 - Unremarkable and predictable interior experience



other furnishings are unremarkable and inconsequential to the architecture of the library. If removed, the space could just as easily have been an office floor or dance studio. In addition to the bleakness of the space, all seating is clustered next to the librarian's desk where surveillance is possible and quietness is enforced, thus ensuring that little meaningful human interaction can occur within the library and any possibility for memorability or appropriation has been erased.



Figure 2.30 - Civic presence of the library



Figure 2.31 - Typical interior condition



Figure 2.32 - Rules communicated by signage



Figure 2.33 - The manifestation of placelessness

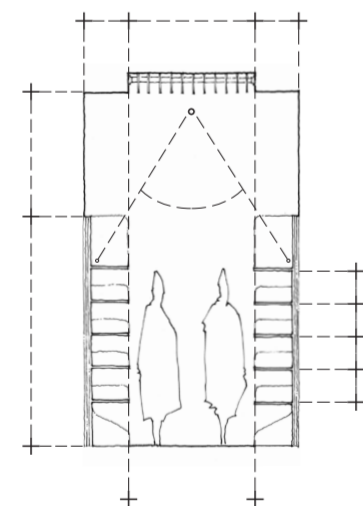


Figure 2.34 - Uncompromisingly utilitarian

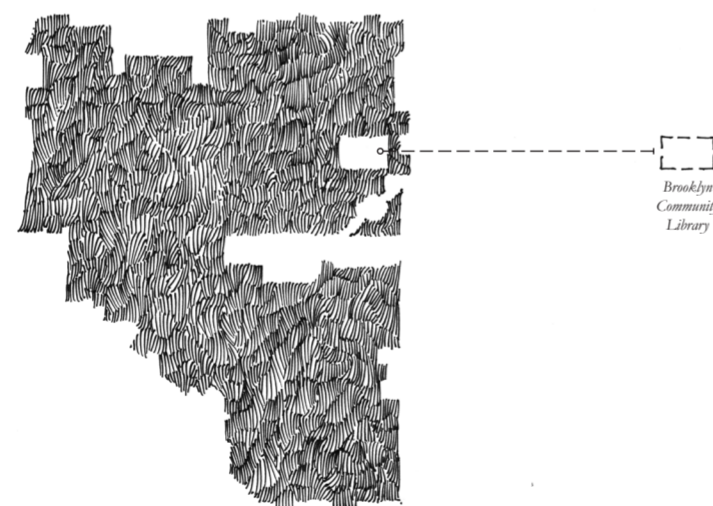


Figure 2.35 - Library as an institution is subservient to the mall

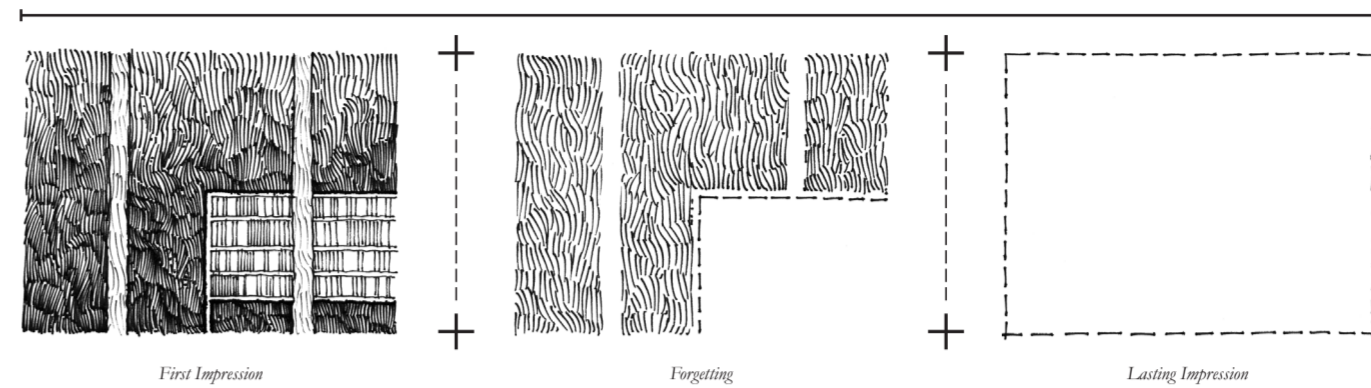


Figure 2.36 - Lack of memorability of the library

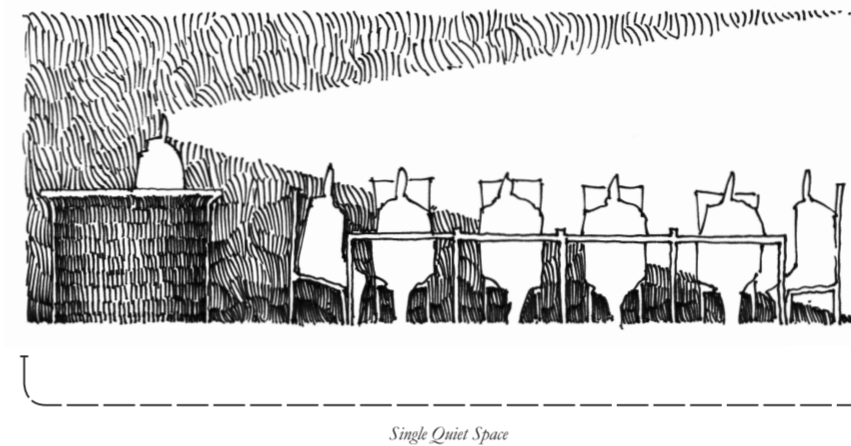


Figure 2.37 - Impossibility for social interaction

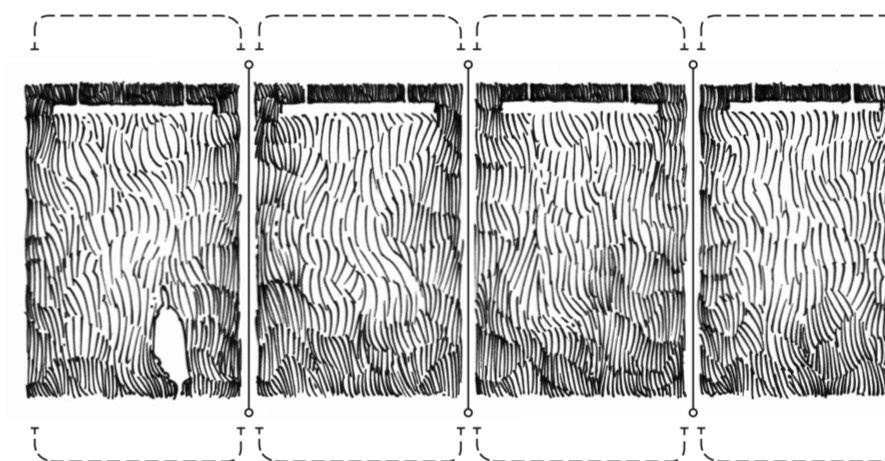


Figure 2.38 - Endlessly repeating elements



Figure 2.39 - Generic architectural expression means that function is communicated through signage rather than architecture





2.4

CREATING PLACE

Contemporary philosophical discourse surrounding the topic of place stresses its necessity and importance (Relph 1976). The significance of place is also understood by many in relation to the architectural discipline, who describe the creation of place as the fundamental task of architecture (Jordaan 2015), and it is from this call that this study will investigate the creation of architectural place as a means of addressing the issue of institutional placelessness.

2.4.1 - PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD

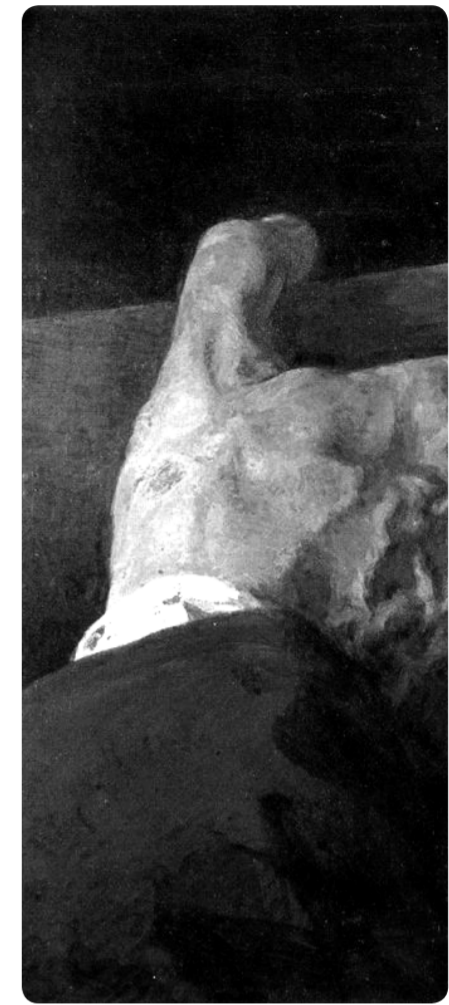
According to Leach (2005:80), phenomenology is the study of phenomena through the lens of human experience, as well as the interpretation of phenomena as a means of understanding their ontological significance. Of the various types of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology of the Heideggerian school of thought is the one most intimately linked to the architectural discipline and has been argued to be an effective methodology for the creation of architectural place (Jordaan 2015), and will therefore be used for this study. As a methodology, it relies on the designer's existing topistic knowledge and memory of existing places in conjunction with a hermeneutic understanding of places that can be used to inform the creation of new architectural place.



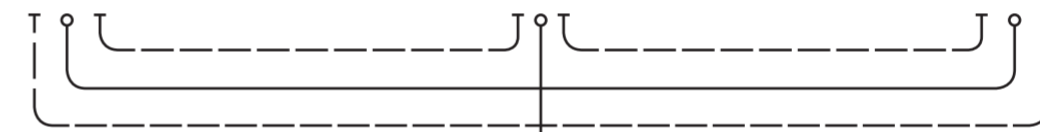
The Material Dimension



The Lived Dimension



The Mental Dimension



2.4.2 - THE TRIAD

In *Constructing Place*, Jordaan (2015) provides a comprehensive understanding of the nature of place, gleaned from a synthesis of the ideas of seminal phenomenologists Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in order to effectively develop a framework for the architectural creation of place. This framework takes the form of a triad structure where the notion of place is broken up into three interrelated dimensions, each containing multiple themes to be considered. The three dimensions that structure the framework are in no hierarchical order: the material dimension of place, the lived

dimension of place and the mental dimension of place. The material dimension refers to the physical things, materials and joints that define a sense of place as well as the intentions behind their expression. The lived dimension refers to the reciprocity between the material and the lived realms where rituals and bodily actions define the sense of place. The mental dimension refers to how the perception of spaces through the senses, our imagination and our memories also informs our experience of place (Jordaan 2015). Using the framework, one needs to consider all three dimensions of place individually, as well as their relationships and overlaps with each other. The advantage

of approaching place making through the lenses of this triad necessitates an acknowledgement of the totality of place in all of its intricacies as compared to a simplified or reduced version thereof, making it an appropriate framework through which to structure a thorough exploration of a solution for the issue of institutional placelessness. In response to the intentions of Jordaan (2015:199) that the triad be tested as a system by architecture students and practitioners, this framework will be critically employed as a means of structuring and informing the place making processes of this study.

Figure 2.40 - The three dimensions of the triad

