The initial intentions of this dissertation were to investigate the phenomenon of neglected buildings and urban spaces that are appropriated by the homeless, and to explore the potential that this appropriation provides in the transformation and (re)activation of such sites. Throughout the dissertation, the topic was split into two themes: the social condition of homelessness and informal appropriation, and the historical condition of the architectural heritage of the site. In the academic and practice world of architecture, these two themes are often addressed somewhat separately. Their varied approaches often fail to overlap, and solutions tend to ignore one in favour of the other. Thus, this project has attempted to connect these frequently disconnected themes by navigating the tensions of the social and the historical in an effort to honour and address both. The social condition of homelessness and appropriation forms the primary focus of this dissertation, while the historical condition and heritage form the secondary focus. Therefore, emphasis was placed on addressing social needs in the context of respecting the heritage of the site. The intervention has aimed to uncover the site's latent potential by navigating the tensions between social and historical, permanence and temporality, existing and new, and formal and informal – building on existing activities of appropriation to create new layers of architecture, while honouring the existing heritage. It has sought to reimagine the isolated spaces of social and spatial decay as a layered, reintegrated and constantly evolving place of inclusion and safety.

Looking back

Essay One set the scene for the dissertation and illuminated the author's normative position as a combination of social values that consider space as a dynamic product of user appropriation and contextual sensitivity that involves the use of local materials, skills and context. These values are reflected in the intentions of the dissertation, as well as the final design and technical resolution of a contextually and socially sensitive intervention. The theoretical framework of appropriation, palimpsest, phenomenology and overlaying difference framed the project intentions and served as a lens through which the research on homelessness, the phenomenon of occupied neglected buildings, the analyses of the site and its users, and design informants are

approached. The initial research on homelessness and case studies of local occupied neglected buildings provided an overview of the social context of this project and the Melgisedek site. It also shed light on the reasons and nature of appropriation of such sites depending on its context, indicating that peri-urban sites (such as Melgisedek in Prinshof) with interstitial open spaces and less threat of eviction or harassment tend to be taken ownership of, leading to more positive, community-supporting appropriation. Lastly, the historical timeline of the site revealed the complex tangible and intangible palimpsest that exists in the manifestation of the two themes of social and historical conditions. These explorations paved the way for further analyses of Melgisedek in its physical context and the people who reside there towards the development of an informed, multi-layered and sensitive programme and approach to the site.

Essay Two expanded upon various analytical tasks for an in-depth understanding of the site, its users and its design potential. The goal was to bridge the general research in Essay One and the site-specific research in Essay Two with the initial conceptual and design informants, ideas and decisions. The two themes of historical and social conditions were explored with regards to the specific site in terms of the existing architecture (viewing this as part of a palimpsestic whole) and the proposed palimpsestic heritage approach to the site. The qualitative mapping and thorough user analysis delved further into the social condition on site. Interviews with relevant stakeholders provided valuable insight into the immediate and long-term needs and the issues faced by the site's informal residents. This informed the proposed mixed, multi-layered site programme with an emphasis on the transitional housing and social welfare component. Informed by the precedent studies, it was concluded that an approach of incrementality, adaptability and flexibility should be applied to the development of programme and space to be sensitive to the changing needs of the users and to address their immediate needs first. This led to the development of a phased site vision and strategy with a three-stranded programme that strives to build on the identified existing activities and forms of appropriation, incorporating and reinterpreting them into a site vision that seeks to address the needs and issues of the homeless on the site and reintegrate them into society.

18.21.

Lastly, Essay Three explored the conceptual strategy of a "scale of permanence" that acts as a tool through which the historical and social conditions – and various tangible and intangible tensions – can be navigated and applied to programme and architectural language, materiality and technical exploration, and indirectly to environmental considerations. With the scale of permanence as a driver, the programme and typology of transitional housing was elaborated in conjunction with various typological precedents, with an aim to understand and apply the programmatic and spatial requirements to the layout and organisation of the various design iterations. While applying principles of adaptability and flexibility, the design iterations were related back to these levels of permanence, which led to explorations of materiality and construction. Here, the layering of materials not only expressed the various levels of permanence, but was also guided by an intent to make use of local, affordable and humble materials to encourage user involvement in initial and future construction and alteration, as well as to create a symbiotic dialogue with the existing architecture. The intention to elevate and reinterpret local materials through sophisticated and dignified execution is expressed in the detailing and technical resolution. Lastly, the environmental considerations express the intention of a resilient, constantly evolving intervention that grows in harmony with its residents and natural context.

Opportunities for future research

Although the proposed intervention is applied to the specific site and its users, it is intended to serve as a prototypical exploration of how relevant and current complex social issues may be approached in tandem with a respect for existing heritage on other similar sites in South Africa. It also suggests a possible approach to addressing the issue of homelessness and the issue of [occupied] neglected/abandoned buildings, which are so closely intertwined. With a constant shift between social and heritage considerations, the project attempts to bridge the gap that often exists between them in many architectural endeavours. However, future work and research could expand on and delve into a more direct and physical engagement with existing Further research could also expand on the occupation and appropriation of neglected buildings and spaces by the vulnerable, especially from a spatial perspective. Comparison to international scenarios, causes and factors would further inform the appropriateness of proposed solutions and interventions with the understanding of the multitude of variables at play. This dissertation begins to shed light oncertain nuances of the common phenomenon of this form of informal occupation and homelessness-related issues.

Upon further reflection, many debates around homelessness and suitable design approaches to the appropriation of space were engaged and built upon.

Insights on homelessness and local nuances

Although there are many common themes and issues globally regarding the issue of homelessness, one must acknowledge that each site and situation is unique in its nuances and manifestations. Therefore, solutions that have been proposed abroad may not be entirely applicable, appropriate or successful locally or even from one site to another. For example, at Melgisedek, the existence of many sub-communities and cultural diversity necessitated a spatial intervention that respects the need for individual space and even separate communal pockets or clusters that do not "force" inhabitants to live entirely as one large community, which can often be assumed to be the desirable outcome. Although this typology respects the innate human need for privacy and intimate community, it also acknowledges that differences in cultures are positive and do not need to be blurred or eradicated through space in order to foster a sense of inclusion. Another example of this is some of the causes of certain groups' homelessness or the perpetuation thereof. At Melgisedek, many of the existing occupants lack legal documentation and the means to obtain it. This means that if a typical formal social housing development were to be developed on site, it would serve a very different vulnerable population of users that possess legal documentation, employment etc, and inadvertently would further displace those without documentation, thus perpetuating their homelessness. Therefore, the proposed intervention in this dissertation operates somewhere between the legitimisation and improvement of existing informal conditions and the introduction of formal interventions and typologies. Ultimately, there will never be one all-encompassing solution to any spatial issue, let alone this complex social phenomenon of homelessness. Solutions require sensitivity, empathy and nuanced understanding of unique communities.

Challenges in addressing appropriation and homelessness through design

The intended uses of a space often differ from the actual uses, and these are difficult to predict. As architects and designers, we tend to the side of prediction, problem-solving and determining how spaces should be used. When designing for appropriation, and more so for complex social issues such as homelessness, the challenge comes in balancing the architect's design expertise in defining,

shaping and creating space with the user's agency as a design tool in itself. Where and when do we design and dictate spatial functions, uses and types of appropriation? When do we allow for ambiguity without creating non-spaces, but just enough ambiguity to open up spatial possibilities to allow for user ownership and future resilience of changing needs? This fine line between determinate and indeterminate space is one still contested in many projects considering user agency and appropriation, where this project attempts to offer only one of many possible solutions.

Furthermore, homelessness is a multifaceted, complex issue with many socio-political, -spatial and -historical factors at play where architecture alone cannot offer a solution. Architects and designers should not see homelessness as a "problem we can and should solve", but rather should acknowledge it as a cause and result of many other issues we have little to no control over. By implication, we should view it as a phenomenon of human existence that affects space. As Godsell (2021) states, designers should aim to cater for homelessness rather than "cure" it. Therefore, we can offer spatial solutions to some of the results, symptoms and spatial divides that exist in connection to homelessness. Space can encourage or discourage interaction and inclusion, it can foster and convey a sense of safety or intimidation, sensitivity or indifference. It is within these intangibles where designers have the ability to create tangible manifestations that can either improve or exacerbate the volatile conditions of the vulnerable and excluded.

Finally, a deeper appreciation of the complexities and importance of the various social and historical conditions explored in this dissertation have led to observations, conclusions and design approaches that could be further explored and developed in the workplace. These include sensitive responses to complex, layered contexts; the use of appropriate materials and construction methods; and simple, adaptable systems that are easy to construct using standard, available materials.

In conclusion, this dissertation has fostered an increased empathy for vulnerable people that are so often disregarded or excluded from society and its spatial ideals. Although architecture alone cannot begin to solve these complex issues, architects can apply deeper empathy and understanding in the shaping and reshaping of our cities. Through architecture, we can offer possible ways of tackling the socio-spatial divides of the past to create more inclusive environments that promote individual and communal agency for the future.

Fig. 18.21. Page 156: 3D render of the new Melgisedek complex (Author 2021).