essay one

SETTING THE SCENE

01

introduction

1.2.

[a]

NORMATIVE POSITION

Although the normative position is constantly evolving and expanding, it is currently based on three strands of social and contextual values.

Firstly, architecture is the "sensitive container" in which people's lived experiences unfold and where memories are rooted in place (Zumthor 1998: 12). Therefore, as designers, I believe we have a social responsibility to the people we design for, their experiences and the place-identities they engage. It is important to design spaces with an understanding of how people from different cultural backgrounds use and transform space, acknowledging that space is a dynamic social product that evolves far beyond the expertise of the architect (Awan, Schneider and Till 2011, Hill 2003). As designers, we should acknowledge the user's appropriation of space as a means to take ownership and to belong. Through this user-centred approach, architecture can begin to impact and uplift society.

Secondly, architecture should be driven by a commitment to understand the particular social and site-specific needs and identity of a given context, leading to contextually appropriate designs created using local knowledge, traditions, materials and skills. Building on the concept of tabula plena, architecture that is "inlaid into site" with a sensitivity to the multiple layers of social, physical, cultural and historical networks is necessary to ground design in its place (Frampton 1983: 151).

Lastly, the honesty of materials contributes to a sense of place and time. Therefore, material choice and construction should express the ephemerality, contextual sensitivity, sustainability and cultural identity of a place to act as a sinew that connects the site, the people, the heritage and the surroundings.

In this dissertation, the topic of homelessness is approached through the user-centred lens of social responsibility and a palimpsestic view of socially produced space, as outlined in the normative position. The focus of this dissertation emerges from a desire to understand, empathise with and build on the way the homeless transform space and express belonging in a contested environment where legal ownership and belonging are rare.

As homelessness in the City of Tshwane swells due to social, political and economic exclusion among numerous contributors (Ntakirutimana 2015: 6, Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015), the urban homeless often seek shelter in neglected or abandoned buildings and urban spaces, (re)appropriating them to suit their survival needs while being confronted with "public" spaces that reflect society's exclusion of the homeless (Cross et al. 2010: 18, Ntakirutimana 2015: 5, Penfold 2012: 994).

The occupation and informal (re)appropriation of neglected buildings in South Africa is often vilified or overlooked by society and equated with illegality and the degradation of the built environment (Doron, 2000, Shaw and Hudson 2009). This spontaneous appropriation is viewed as causing a loss to heritage and identity (Doron 2000, Grunewald and Breed 2013). However, the transient heritage and identities of these places should not only be considered in terms of their official historical, political and architectural value, but also in terms of the often unrecognised social narratives related to the experiences, change in

use and appropriation by the marginalised, thus adding to the layered identities of these spaces and their urban environments (Bakker 2010, Shaw and Hudson 2009).

This study is aimed at exploring the spatial and design potential of the appropriation of derelict buildings by their informal inhabitants. It is argued that this appropriation adds to the palimpsest of evolving identity (Rende 1998: 136) embedded in scenarios such as that of Melgisedek, Pretoria, which provides the potential to re-imagine these places as socially inclusive spaces (Dreifuss-Serrano 2020: 597, Shaw and Hudson 2009: 9). In this study, the author argues for a positive and creative spatial potential latent in these condemned and forgotten sites, guided by both the informal appropriation and the architectural and historical heritage of these spaces.

In this essay, the general, urban and architectural issues are laid out to set the scene for the dissertation project. Thereafter, the framework of place and place-making theory is unpacked, forming the lens through which the theme of homeless appropriation, the research and the design are approached. The research methodology for studying the general issue is then described, followed by the documentation of observations and analyses of local case studies. A brief look at homelessness in the City of Tshwane serves as the background to local scenarios of informally occupied neglected buildings in Pretoria. Lastly, the focus case is selected and positioned, and the scenario is described by means of an overview and historical timeline.

Fig. 1.1: Previous page: Photograph taken at Melgisedek and edited by Author (2021).
Fig. 1.2. Far right, page 3: Clothing of homeless occupants of Justice College, photograph by Forder (2019) edited by Author (2020).

[c]
GENERAL ISSUE

Occupation of neglected buildings by the homeless

The phenomenon of vulnerable people occupying and appropriating neglected buildings for shelter is seen as a strategy for survival in the face of homelessness and the inability to access affordable housing (Strijdom and Viljoen 2014: 1207, Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 20). This appropriation is ever-changing to suit immediate needs. These "abandoned" sites are seen as spots of urban decay and crime.

[d]
URBAN ISSUE

" a city of differences and of fragments of life that do not connect"
(Sennett 1993: 125)

Isolated pockets and exclusive quasi-public spaces

A fragmented, disconnected city results from a disengagement with the "other" (Sennett 1993: 147), residue of past segregated planning and continued urban exclusion of non-conforming phenomena that include these spaces of informality and decay (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 4, Penfold 2012, Shaw and Hudson 2009). These perceived "dead zones", "wastelands" and "voids" threaten an exclusive image of urbanity (Doron 2000: 248). In response, public and surrounding spaces are increasingly privatised and barricaded, perpetuating the isolation and marginalisation of these condemned spaces and their unwanted occupants (De Kock 2014: 64-65, Penfold 2012, Shaw and Hudson 2009: 1).

[e]
ARCHITECTURAL ISSUE
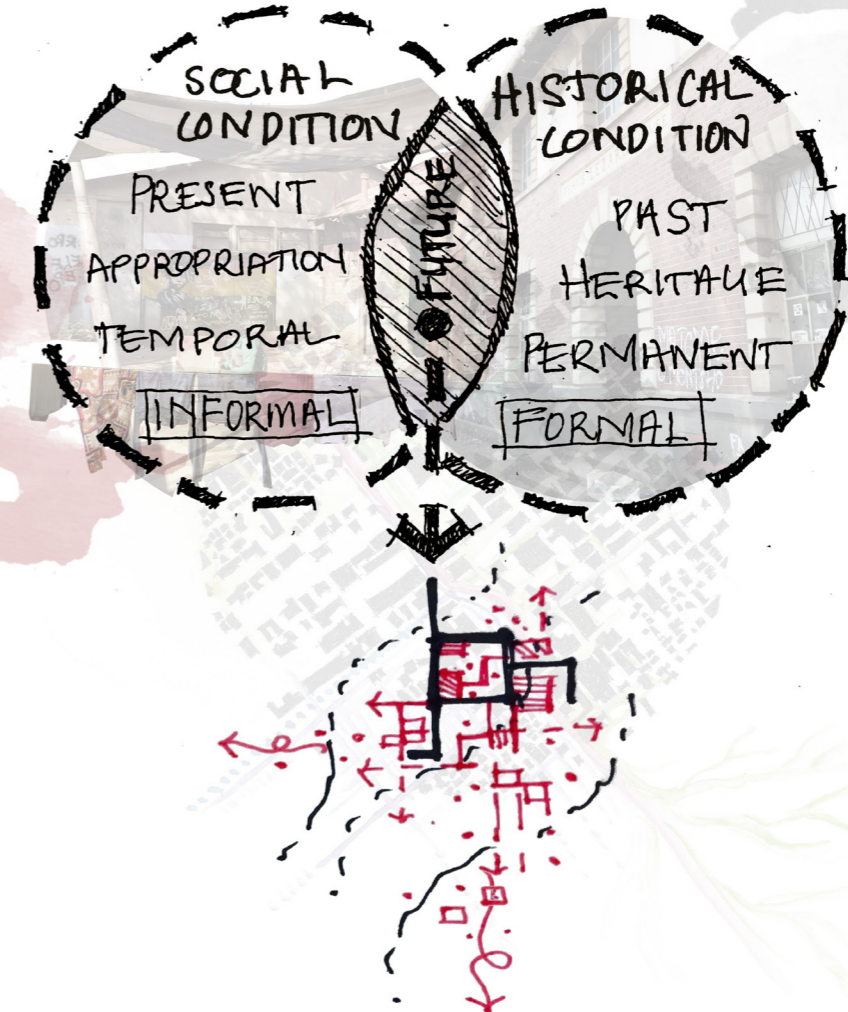
Legitimising existing activities & appropriation

How can architecture uncover the latent potential of informal appropriation of decaying urban spaces and provide a platform for future appropriation while honouring the site's heritage?

The architectural issue involves the challenge of legitimising and building on existing activities and informal appropriation of forgotten spaces while celebrating the architectural heritage of these spaces.

By extension, the aim is to approach design in a manner that accommodates and celebrates ongoing appropriation, incrementality and changing needs while navigating the existing tensions between old and new, formal and informal, social and heritage issues, permanence and transience.

Fig. 1.3. Top left, page 4: General issue graphic illustrating derelict buildings occupied by the homeless (Author 2021).
Fig. 1.4. Bottom left, page 4: Urban issue graphic illustrating spatial segregation: isolation and exclusion of neglected spaces and people, and the privatisation of public spaces (Author 2021).
Fig. 1.5. Above: Architectural issue graphic illustrating the overlap of the formal and informal, heritage and appropriation (Author 2021).