



# Chapter 1. Introduction



“If all buildings inevitably carry meaning, then we should do well to see how they do it. At the very least, that will help us to understand all buildings better. And if our buildings are going to symbolise anyway – despite our best (or worst) intentions – then an understanding of how they do so may help us design them to do it better.” (Broadbent. A, p125)

# 1. Introduction

“I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other.” (Palasmaa, 2005, p.26)

Man is constantly engaged in a process of ‘placing’ himself in the world. On a subconscious level man is continually influenced by his physical environment, relating himself to the world around him. Heidegger (in Sharr, 2007, p.8) talks of reminders in the environment that allow people to place themselves in a broader context.

Man does, however, manipulate his environment. Consciously and subconsciously man shapes the space that he inhabits. Palasmaa (2005, p.8) states that architecture deals with the question of man’s being in the world; relating the question of human existence in space and time. Man writes into the built environment something about who he is, when he is, and how he is in that environment. The aspirations and ideals of man are reflected in the environment that he creates (Sharr, 2007, p.10).

This suggests a reciprocal relationship between man and his environment. Man locates himself in the bigger picture, he then configures space, consciously or subconsciously, to reflect the question of his existence and his location in the bigger picture. He then relates himself to his created environment and reinterprets his location in the world. This may lead to a further reconfiguration of space and repetition of the same process.

Sharr (2007, p.9) states that the inhabitant’s life is ‘configured’ by the building. It is this potential of ar-

chitecture (or buildings) to contribute to man’s awareness of his existence, that Heidegger finds most important (Sharr, 2007, p.35). This relationship, man’s awareness and understanding of his environment, is based on the experience, the perception and evaluation of that perception, of the building or environment. The significance of a built object (or thing) lies in the fact that its presence can influence the ‘parameters’ of people’s daily lives (Sharr, 2007, p.48). As people engage in daily life and are affected by built ‘things’ they are reminded of their existence and their place in the world.

Palasmaa (2005, p.22) also focuses on the importance of the ‘physical, sensual and embodied essence of architecture’. He criticizes the emphasis on the intellectual dimension of architecture and talks of weakened participation in the world and architecture being detached from cognitive and social connection.

Architecture is significant to the relation of man to the world, but it is in the experience of architecture that its significance lies, not in an intellectual conceptualization. Powel (2000, p.16) writes that architecture is not simply about appearances, but about substance. It is a holistic construct, an interaction of aesthetics, politics, finance and symbolism, which provides an opportunity for man to appreciate his existence in a larger context.

In post-apartheid Pretoria this awareness of existence, of the right to existence, and a new relationship between man in time and space is extremely significant. Here the built ‘thing’ needs to reflect a new awareness of man’s place in the world.



Figure 1: Dominance of government buildings in Brasilia



Figure 2: Dominance of government structures in Washington

## 2. Background

South Africa has a history rich with opposing political factions, territorial groupings and different spatialities of power. Mabin (2009, p.3 - 5) describes how the various attempts throughout history to foster unity were expressed in the sharing of capital functions and spaces. He states that Pretoria was founded as a new capital with the purpose of unifying diverse sociopolitical factions. In line with this conciliatory agenda, the main symbol of National Government in the country, the Union Buildings, do not dominate the city in the same way that similar buildings in Wash-

ington and Brasilia do. Mabin (2009, p.14) interprets this separation of symbolic sites from the urban fabric as an absence of 'monolithic dominance', which indicates a different relation between state power and the populace. This understated democratic relation between political power and the voice of the citizenry is a strong characteristic of South African culture.

After the elections in 1994 the debate concerning the location of the capital city was renewed. Strong arguments were made for the suitability of Cape Town as 'mother city' and Johannesburg as the seat of economic power. Indeed Provincial Government moved

Figure 3: Locality of South Africa - leading African capital





Figure 4: Schultes' plan linking east and west Berlin

to Johannesburg shortly after 1994. Eventually the decision was made that Pretoria would remain the administrative capital and in 2001 Cabinet took the decision that National Government headquarters should remain in Pretoria's inner city. This decision was followed by the requirement that the Department of Public Works should develop a framework for the improvement of the physical environment within which these headquarters would function (Mabin, 2009, p.19). The urban design framework which was commissioned, now known as Re Kgabisa Tshwane, was aimed at the consolidation of severely fragmented National Government Departments around a proposed system of open spaces. Although the program includes refurbishment of properties owned by the Department of Public Works, it entailed the creation of a number of new buildings. As part of the urban design framework a set of architectural guidelines was developed. The approach included a combination of the expression of a local identity and context as well as the expression of its identity as leading African capital (Richards, 2005).

### 3. Capital cities

Literature suggests that the continued success of a capital city relies on the use, restructuring and re-interpretation of symbolic sites. Thus it is in the expression and concretization of various sets or systems of meaning in the urban fabric that the symbolic significance of a national capital lies. The capital city has as its function the representation of the nation's ideals. Scott Campbell (quoted in Shatkin, 2006, p.577) describes capital cities as 'symbolic theatres' for national identities. They contain the collective memory of the people and provide the stage for ceremonies and events; they contain spaces of gathering and spaces of representation. The capital is a place that should be infused with meaning, even while it is shaped by history and political events, it should influence and reinforce ideas.

South Africa underwent a major change in sociopolitical ideology in 1994. It was inevitable that there would follow a time of re-interpretation in cities and their architecture, in some ways similar to that which

Berlin experienced after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Ladd, 1997, p.226). Ladd writes that the city had to acknowledge that the addition of a 'new' group of people had influenced the nation.

The success of Berlin in re-establishing itself as the national capital, was in large part due to the urban design of Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank who managed to capture the idea and symbolism of reunification in the urban fabric. The plan located the new centre of government in a part of the city that, by a strip of east-west buildings, symbolically linked sections of what used to be East and West Germany. In addition to this, the mixed use urban character of the plan was seen as accessible and therefore a democratic space. Ladd describes this design as an 'unmistakable urban statement'. The presence of national government headquarters in the capital and the concretization of meaning in the urban fabric are key factors in the success of Berlin to function as national capital city in a reunified country. These are tools that are also available to the National Government of South Africa.

## 4. Problem statement

Freschi (2006) states that the South African government has not attempted to use the construction of large-scale public buildings to re-brand nationalism. He states that the government has simply appropriated the buildings of the previous regime, 'papered over or removed the more odious reminders of the past'.

It is the point of departure of this study that it is necessary that new meanings should be introduced to urban fabric, especially in the capital city. In the context of a country where the establishment of a constitution and democratic government has so directly affected the lives of such a large percentage of the popula-

tion, it is essential that a physical manifestation of that change be incorporated into the physical world to which people relate on a day-to-day basis.

Within the historic context of a city that is not characterised by 'monolithic' dominance by government structures, it is not the intention to establish an architectural language or stylistic expression of monumental proportions in the tradition of public buildings of previous eras. Instead the intention is to explore ways in which to inscribe such ideals as democracy as new layers of meaning into the urban fabric through the use and functioning of the public buildings.

## 5. Research question

This study aims to undertake the design of a National Government building in the inner city. The main aim of the study is to explore the expression of meaning in government buildings, and specifically in the context of the capital city.

The research is separated into three main areas, each of which is then divided into further main categories:

- Identity
  - The question of being
  - Multiple identities
  - Democracy
- Function
  - National Government
  - Department of Home Affairs
- Expression of meaning
  - Symbolism, metaphor and allegory
  - Experiential space
  - How an organization becomes legible in a building

## 6. Methodology

Wilson (2002) states that methodology provides the philosophical background and approach to the research method. This section is therefore aimed at providing firstly the philosophy underlying the approach to the research question and thereafter giving a short description of the methods to be employed in this study.

### i. Phenomenological approach

As stated earlier in this document there is a postulate of a reciprocal causal relationship between people and their physical environment, an interaction between that which is shaped and influenced by man and man being influenced in turn by that environment. People are constantly orientating themselves in the world and in a process of understanding the world.

According to Wilson (2002) a phenomenological approach requires that one seeks to discover the world 'as it is experienced by those involved in it'. The emphasis is on the understanding of another person's experience and the meaning that people attach to experience. It focuses on a cognitive awareness and encounter of objects as well as more abstract constructs (Toadvine, et al., 2005).

### ii. Qualitative research methods

Phenomenology falls into the category of qualitative research as it is essentially dealing with non-quantifiable elements such as experience, encounter, and meaning. Wilson (2002) states that one is 'urged to get as close as possible' to people's experience.

Both Wilson (2002) and Trochim (2006) describe observation as a fundamental method of data collection within the phenomenological approach. Within this study observation includes the researcher as a part of the participant population. The experience and understanding of the space will be, at least partially, informed by the experience of the researcher.

### Case studies

A case study is an intensive study of a specific individual or specific context. Trochim (2006) states that there is no single scientific way to conduct a case study.

## 7. Conclusion

The first step of the study is to place the project within a context. To this end an urban design framework was developed for the inner city of Pretoria. The framework focuses on flexibility of use patterns throughout the city over time, in particular on the existence of experiential fields between points of social, cultural, political and / or economic significance. The framework will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The following chapters will deal with the research questions mentioned above and will be divided into a literature study, precedent study and site analysis. The conclusions will inform the design.

The design will further be influenced by environmental and other technical aspects which will be discussed in the design development section. A technical investigation will conclude the project stage.

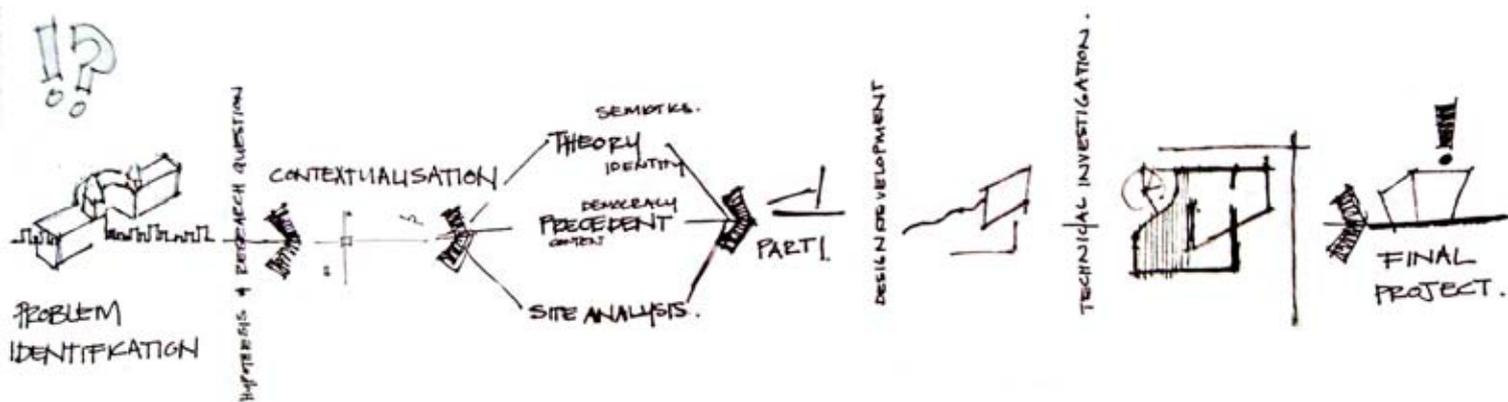


Figure 5: Process diagram