

Chapter 5. Literature



“It is hardly surprising, given the way in which architectural meaning has been suppressed so severely over the past fifty years or so, that some of their attempts, to say the least, are rather halting. They still do not seem sure just how buildings ‘carry’ meaning.”
(Broadbent, 1996, p.138)

1. Identity: the question of being

One of the main questions that people are confronted with, and which is especially relevant in the current South African context, is the question of being. We have an innate desire to understand who we are and what our place is in the world. Heidegger stated that this question of being is central to life and should be celebrated (Sharr, 2007, p.7).

To Heidegger the question of being starts with the fact that human beings 'are'. To him this fact goes hand in hand with the fact that the world exists before we attempt to understand it (Palasmaa, 2007, p. 27). According to him there are four basic conditions of human existence and these four basic elements provide the basis around which we orientate ourselves, and within which we relate our being. The four elements are: earth, sky, divinities and mortals. It is through our experience of these elements that we may come to understand our own being. These elements are always present and therefore provide a constant point of reference to which we can align ourselves and question our own qualities and characteristics as well as the circumstances that we find ourselves in (Sharr, 2007, pp. 31 -32).

Heidegger op cit. is concerned with the fact that, especially in the western world, aspects of everyday life distract us from the priority of considering the question of being. He states that the awareness of being has become rare and that we are losing the ability to understand our existence in a broader context. Palasmaa (ibit.) supports this view and states that there is an increasing separation of the self from the world. He links this separation to the development of western 'ego-consciousness'.

Heidegger states that there are traces of the four elements in the environment and that when we no-

tice these reminders, and reflect on our own being, it offers a respite from the daily life (Sharr, 2007, p. 7-8). We have a 'mental need' to experience this consciousness of being rooted in a larger context. According to Palasmaa (ibit.) it is the task of architecture, in the man-made environment, to facilitate this experience. He states that architecture is confronted with expressing and relating man's being in the world and is engaged in the metaphysical questions of time and duration and of life and death. Architecture can help to centre people in the world and thus that the task of architecture is to 'make visible how the world touches us' (Palasmaa, 2007). The aim of architecture in this sense is to offer individuals a place from which they can contemplate their being.

Architecture further relates to the four elements identified by Heidegger through the fact that it configures societal institutions and the activities of human presence as well as interaction and separation (Palasmaa, 2005, p.50).

i. 'Being' in Africa

In African philosophy the consideration of the four elements classified by Heidegger shifts in order to give priority to 'mortals'. The question of 'being' is considered first and foremost in relation to the collective. The saying 'umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu', which means that 'to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others' (Van Rensburg, n. d., p.19) is central in this approach.

The African history is one of collectivism (Travis, 1991, p.15). Spatial layouts of native compounds are organised around a central collective space, and society was based on a communal culture of extended families, joint acquisition and shared possession (Hughes, 1994, pp. 59-60). Most activities were structured within the central collective space

and Steyn (2006, p.42) goes so far as stating that this collective space was indeed viewed as the home and that the surrounding individual structures served merely as sleeping quarters.

In the African context buildings are arranged in such a way as to reveal spaces sequentially, and hierarchically, and the value of built structures lies in the fact that they provide settings for interaction (Lipman, 2003, p.6). This orientation towards society adds a layer of social responsibility to the creation of architecture.

In the contemporary African setting the flexibility and ephemerality of urban spaces come into focus as a replacement of the traditional communal space. Morojele (in Van Rensburg, n.d., p.20) explains that ritual space becomes a temporary event as impermanent stages are put together in significant communal spaces. Parallel to the ritual event in communal space is the transfiguration of domestic space towards a social event, temporarily blurring the boundaries between public and private. The strength of the identity of the being in relation to the community, thus continues in the contemporary urban setting.

ii. Multiple identities

Joubert (2007, p.1) suggests that the notion of identity has never throughout history been as pertinent as currently. This pertinent search for identity surely is the result of a number of circumstances. The main circumstance would be the fact that since 1994 South Africa has been, once again, at a crossroad where diverse cultures and identities have come together in the first true attempt at a complete democracy. The validation of a whole set of new identities as equal to that which has been the dominant identity was bound to be, at the very least, a slightly unsteady process.

In addition to the above-mentioned set of circumstances the process of globalisation has placed new emphasis on regional identities. Featherstone (n.d., p.14) claims that against the expectation of a created uniformity, the result of globalisation has been raised levels of awareness concerning diversity. He states (p. 8-9) that international competition has led to increasing pressure to develop a 'coherent cultural identity'.

In an increasingly cosmopolitan world this problem is experienced, albeit less intensely, all over the world. International travel and accessibility has led to the development of sub-cultures and multiple identities in many countries and cities. Initial projections of assimilation seem to have been inaccurate and Featherstone (n.d., p. 9) comments on the acknowledgement of multiple identities.

Within this context it has been noted that human beings have the ability to live with, adopt, multiple identities (Featherstone, n.d.). He states, when discussing African-American cultures, that there exists in their identity a double-consciousness, created by their experience both inside and outside of western contexts.

South Africa has a history rich with cultural diversity, according to Van Rensburg (n.d., p.20), a 'highly differentiated society'. Lipman (2003, p.2) states that 'we relish the richness of variety'. The idea of diversity, variety and multiple identities seems to have become the centre of being, the basis of South African identity. Lipman (2003, p.2) comments that there is a belief, in South Africa, that there can be unity in cultural diversity.

The influence of this diversity on architectural expression has been the creation of a heterogeneous, hybrid and complex sign (Noble, 2008, p.72). Joubert (2007, p.1) talks of an architectural introspection and

adds the regional orientation to the list of architecture expressions.

Noble (2008, p.74) states that during the apartheid era black cultural capacities were subjugated. The architecture of the country was informed by dominant ideology and social systems, and according to Noble (ibid, p.75), the architectural discourse of the west.

In the context of acknowledgement of multiple identities and diversity and against the background of man affirming his being, existence, both through the community and his physical environment, it is crucial that, as Noble (ibid, p. 75) puts it, 'African identities and narratives should gain expression in architecture'. This sentiment is reflected by Minister of Public Works, Jeff Radebe (in Joubert, 2007, p.2) when he states that the Government wishes to see, in the built environment, the ability of African trends to reveal themselves.

The aim, in terms of architecture and the built environment, is the subversion of the dominant culture (Noble, 2008, p.75). According to Noble this subversion has as its aim the inclusion of 'subjugated narratives' and the opportunity for 'denied knowledges' to enter the discourse of architectural expression. The goal is therefore an equal representation of the various narratives of cultural diversity, based on the democratic ideal.

This inclusive representation leads to an architectural hybridity, or a double code, which allows the designer to cross the boundary of the dominant discourse or representation (Noble, 2008). Young (in Noble, op cit.) writes that such hybridity eventually results in a process whereby two or more cultures merge into a new cultural identity.

Within the post-apartheid South African context, the question of hybridity in design holds an obvious ap-

peal. It is important that there should not be a continuation of the dominant discourse with regard to architectural and urban expression, but rather a continued focus on the question of expression of the African identity (Noble, 2008, p.87).

There are some common threads in the histories of the various cultural identities that have the potential to bind together the idea of hybridity. The first is the relation to the world, or the site. In his discussions of the various cultural expressions throughout the history of South Africa and specifically the geographic region within which the capital city is located, Fisher (1998) frequently comments on the adaptation of architecture to local environmental circumstances, to topography and climate.

In addition to the regionalist basis of architectural expression, traditional African cultures are based on democratic systems. Even though traditionally there would be a chief presiding over the community council (Gumede, 2007, p.65), the views of everyone are accommodated in a relaxed environment. According to Gumede, acceptable compromise is reached only after every voice has been heard.

In a similar way traditional Afrikaner communities were based on a democratic system, where they would congregate and 'sit down' to formulate constitutions and regulations (Fisher, 1998, p.59).

The idea of hybridity is further strengthened by the fact that the main political factions are based on the unification of diverse factions. Gumede (2007, p.3) states that in the establishment of the ANC, the intention was to unify the chiefs as representatives of various traditional forms of authority as well as educated Africans in positions of political leadership. Similarly the establishment of the Republic, and the establishment of Pretoria, unified separate Afrikaner communities.

The current, post-apartheid system is based on the ANC's ideology of respect for past traditions within the principles of equality, liberty and justice (Gumede, 2007, p.5). This forms the ideal basis for the acknowledgement of multiple identities and the development of hybridity in the expression of the various cultures.

2. Expression of identity

As mentioned before theories of architecture and design have been based on Western society morals and ideology. Agrest and Gandelonas (1996, p.112) state that it has contributed towards the perpetuation of the western society. The consensus among architects is that the representation of African cultures is problematic due to the lack of architectural theory upon which to base such representations (Finch, 2008, p.4).

According to Travis (1991, p. 12) there have been attempts, mostly by African-American architects, to influence this process. These attempts seem to have been difficult and inefficient. In his discussion of attempts by Stern and Tschumi to represent African culture, Finch (2008, p. 4) states that there is a tendency to reduce the 'architecture of Africans' to pre-colonial status or to the 'developmental box'.

i. Symbol, sign and analogy

Since the earliest of times, human beings have used the built environment and formulated symbols to express society and human institutions as well as their relation to the world (Roth, 1993, p.141).

Roth (1993, p.141) states that architecture seems to have been a symbol of communal belief and social institutions since its inception. The significance of

certain structures is clear through the obvious care and dedication that would have been needed for their construction. Roth (1993, p.152) writes, for example, that Stonehenge became a tribal expression of identity and communal purpose through the expenditure of labour necessary for its construction. It was a gathering place and it celebrated the recurring cycle of the sun and of life.

Featherstone (n.d., p.109) places the images and memory of the population, dealing with origins and distinctive qualities of the people, as central to the establishment of a symbolic idea of 'nation'. Bonta (1979, p.30) supports this idea by stating that things acquire meaning because of familiarity, in other words, through social usage which then becomes convention. The collective, consensual, interpretation of 'things' is significant in determining meaning. Meaning is shared by the whole community and is reflected in their behaviour (Bonta, 1979, p.65). Saussure (Agres & Gandelonas, 1996, p.116) refers to this generation of meaning as the 'social contract' and adds a layer of collective training through which such meaning is perpetuated.

Early in the post modern period, the idea of the 'linguistic analogy', that architecture could be seen as a visual language, developed (Nesbitt, 1996, p.110). Semiotics used in this sense of architecture as a set system of signs and meanings becomes, however, a vehicle for the perpetuation of the dominant ideology (Agrest & Gandelonas, 1996, p.114). The reason for this is that it assumes the meanings and interpretations of the ideology in power and reinforces them continually in the production of the built environment.

In addition to this, one has to consider that language, on which the tenets of semiology are based, is a fixed system, based on a social contract (Nesbitt, 1996, p.110). Broadbent (1996, p.133) argues that no such contract exists with regard to the meaning of archi-

ecture. He argues that meaning is based on cultural systems and therefore, in addition to differing between various cultures, is subject to change over time.

The concept of the 'sign', as an entity outside the semiotic system, can however be useful in the discussion on the expression of meaning. Saussure's concept of the sign is a two-part entity, signifier and signified, which is united by a social contract (Broadbent, 1996, p.133). Broadbent (1996, p.133) states that the idea of a signified which is given significance was already established by Vitruvius as being relevant to architecture.

What remains important in this discussion is the fact that the meaning of the signified, or symbol, has to be learned (Broadbent, 1996, p.135). Bonta (1979, p.138) states that when a work, symbol, departs from 'culturally established patterns', it requires clarification. He states that meaning has to be verbalised. There is therefore no inherent meaning in architectural expression, but rather learned meanings that are culturally dependent.

The symbolic relevance of architecture to certain cultures can be seen when looking at Egyptian and Greek examples. Roth (1993, p.166) describes Egyptian architecture that contained symbolic reference to the Nile. A long corridor ending in a broader chamber relating the culmination of the Nile in the broad delta. The columns for which Greek temple construction is known, are similarly believed to represent the sacred groves where offerings had been made previously. Roth states that the architecture seems to have become the concrete form of the ritual.

The danger exists that architects make use of analogy instead of symbolic reference. Joubert (2007, p.7) states that analogy is often too literal and even verges on banality. Jencks (Broadbent, 1996, p.137) supports the viewpoint that analogy tends toward

the banal and describes it as too simple and boring. Steyn (2006, p.44), in his discussion of indigenous African architecture questions the relevance of traditional forms, and raises the possibility that it belongs, instead, to the realm of historical artefacts.

The expression of meaning in architecture should rather be aimed at deeper, more subtle meanings. Broadbent (1996, p.137) uses the example of the Casa Battlo of Antoni Gaudi as a metaphor with a meaning beyond that of the simple allegory. He states that the building is an expression of Catalan nationalism, referring to the slaying of the dragon of Castille by the patron Saint of Barcelona.

There seems to be a general consensus that the symbol and the metaphor are containers of a deeper, more subtle meaning that is based on a social contract, or for which a collective learned meaning exists.

ii. Image and meaning

Palasmaa (2005) bemoans the ever increasing dominance of the eye, and vision, over the other senses in the understanding and expression of architecture. This dominance can be related to the development of technology, including the camera, video camera, television and all technology related to the reproduction of the image. De Certeau (in Palasmaa, 2005, p.17) states that everything is measured by its ability to be shown, and that communication tends to be changed into a visual journey.

The main critique is not against vision itself, but first-ly in the loss of meaning through mass production. Berger (1972, p.19) states that initially a painting was essentially part of the environment that it was located in. The experience of the visual was therefore

dependent on a broader set of sensual experiences. Through mass production, images are now viewed independent of setting and its additional meaning. He states that it is no longer the meaning of art that is important but instead the fact of its originality.

Palasmaa (2005, p.14) adds to this loss of meaning the fact that such reproduction leads to a loss of emotional involvement. There is no longer the need to participate. Palasmaa (2005, p.17) talks of the bodiless observer. The observer is detached from its relation to the environment. There is no longer a supporting set of sensual qualities to enrich the meaning of the visual. He states that architecture has turned into an image product, that there is no longer a spatial experience. Buildings are located in the 'cool realm of vision'. Lipman (2003, p.3) describes these buildings as indifferent moments. He implies a meaninglessness which is perpetuated through the use of meaningless 'signs and symbols stuck on'.

iii. Experience

Palasmaa (2005, p.26) states that the combination of the isolation of the eye and the suppression of the other senses reduces and restrict our experience of the world. He goes on to say that, in fact, the eye weakens the capacity of participation with the world. The ability to relate to the world and to place ourselves in the world, including social relation, is weakened (Palasmaa, 2005, p.13).

At the start of this chapter, it was noted, that Heidegger stated that the world should be understood through 'how it seems to us through our own experience'. It is this experience which is limited by the isolation of the eye from the other senses.

Walter Ong (in Palasmaa, 2005, pp.14-15) points out that the dominance of the visual was a result of the

shift from the oral traditions to written speech. He states that print replaced the dominance of sound. The development of scientific methods to capture and conserve knowledge and meaning also lead, eventually, to the loss of meaning through mass production.

The return to an authentic experience of meaning and knowledge seems to be dependent on a complete sensory experience. Palasmaa (2005, p.27) talks of the integration of sensory experience by the body. He relates this sensory experience by the body back to the question of being, through the constant interaction between our bodies and the environment. This argument is supported by Heidegger's model of human experience and how we relate to the world.

Palasmaa (2005, p.8) further states that cultural practice is susceptible to experience in space and time. He says that cultural practice includes representation in space of human experience. Sensory experience, therefore, seems crucial to the understanding of the world and culture and relating to it.

Architecture can strengthen the experience of being in the world by the use of material, space, scale and engagement of the senses. Travis (1991, p.10) states that architecture is not an abstract thing. It is life, implying the sensory experience of being in the world and being in relation to the community.

Light and darkness

Light has become a quantitative element in architecture (Palasmaa, 2005, p.33). Windows are relegated to percentages of rooms and lighting levels and according to Palasmaa (2005) have lost its ability to indicate deeper meanings. He states that shadows and darkness are essential firstly because it dampens the dominance of vision.

The power of sound and the spoken word becomes

more significant. Palasmaa (2005, p.32) states that thought is allowed to travel and encourages the development of imagination. He states that Alvar Aalto's Saynatsalo Town Hall creates a 'mystical and mythological sense of community'.

The presence of shadow, and dim light, give more life to light and its quality to illuminate and place focus (Palasmaa, 2005, p.33).

Sound

The inherent qualities of sound cause it to be seen as inclusionary and links it to concepts such as connection and solidarity (Palasmaa, 2005, pp.34-35). Sound is omnidirectional and carries further than light, and often, vision. It is as often the absence of sound as it is a certain sound quality that contributes to a powerful experience.

iv. A sense of place

In the experience of Heidegger's fourfold elements, an understanding of and adaptation to place increase the relation to the world, to earth and sky. In a discussion of the construction of Skiddaw House and its adaptation to the local climate, Heidegger states that the building can be read as a certain way of understanding the world around it (Sharr, 2007, p.10). The building responds both to the place and its inhabitants, what Heidegger calls physical and human topography.

Lipman (2003, p.3) places similar emphasis on the combination of relating to both the physical and social climate or context. The understanding of the light, climate and the shape and pitch of the land give architecture a rootedness in the world. In Africa architecture is challenged to deal with intense day-time heat and cold night-time temperatures as well as desert

winds and torrential rains (Hughes, 1994, p.76). It is a place of opposites, extremes, and this is reflected in materials, such as masonry, and architectural elements, such as creative shading devices. Lipman (2003, p. 6) states that architecture 'springs' from the nature of the materials. It is about space, light and organisation. In this sense it responds to both the physical and social needs of the occupants. Lipman reiterates the importance of architecture as a social entity.

Pretoria has a history of adaptation to climate and place, evidenced in architectural movements such as the third vernacular and Brazilian Modernism (Fisher et al., 1998). These architectural movements, however, seem to indicate a strong relation to the world but a weakened relation to culture. Joubert (2007, p.15) is hopeful that contemporary architecture will reassert a design tradition that is sensitive to both the physical and social, or cultural, context.