

400_ theoretical discourse

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- [alexander | lynch]
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The historical analysis presents circumstances that are not uncommon in developing environments. Communities in underdeveloped countries struggle to negotiate the pressures of modernization. The increased need for convenience and comfort has been sought after in western ideals and commodities. Rural environments are in turn laden with modern constructs and services. The identity-rich culture and traditions as cradled by orthodox spatial constructs are thus diminished, where indigenous building methods are set aside in lieu of modern comforts.

Modernization however is in many ways inevitable, in that every society can be expected at some point to advance and live within the now. Peoples of developing environments more often than not have to find a meeting ground for culture and modernity, taking what they can of their culture and expressing it through

their adopted western culture. This of course is characteristic of an erosion of culture and its place as the cornerstone of identity.

By re-evaluating this corruption of culture, architecture can play an integral role in the reaffirmation of cultural and traditional principles. Unlike city or townspeople who are exposed to the contaminants of modernization, those from rural environments are perfectly placed to counter this situation, given their rich cultural affiliations. Villages in the highlands of Lesotho can still act as custodians of culture and traditional ways, in that rural communities have woven the ideals and values of culture into their everyday lives. Thereby, the living, working and playing spaces of the community are laden with their identity. The identity of a place is defined by the character of its people.

Place = space + character

[Nesbitt 1996: 418]

Place and the sense thereof is defined by ones ability to orientate oneself within a space and identify with the specific character of that space. [Nesbitt 1996: 412]

The way these spaces are put together is characteristic of its people and therefore makes them meaningful.

Norberg-Schulz in his essay 'The Phenomenon of Place', he makes the following statement: *The man made parts of the environment are first of all settlements of different scale including paths which connect these settlements, as well as various elements which transform nature into a cultural landscape. If these settlements are organically related to their environment it implies that they serve as foci where the environmental character is condensed and explained. The environment experienced is meaningful.*

[Norberg-Schulz in Nesbitt, 1996:417]



The lure of modernization impedes the progression of meaningful space by introducing alien constructs into a contextually unsuitable environment. As an example, the inappropriate introduction of clay bricks into a rural setting comes at a high cost. Where stone was traditionally sourced on site, it is now discarded as it is difficult to use and to adapt to today's modernity. The people of the area forego culturally binding constructs that are *sensitive to specificity of place* [Nesbitt, 1996:486].

The potency of a place's individual identity becomes diluted through time. Place making has to be true to its region; however, rural peoples have lost confidence in the traditional or vernacular presets as not being malleable enough to changing circumstances. Vernacular constructs and regional techniques are thus deemed stagnant. This view is not entirely wrong given the convenience of current alternatives.

Sadly, the transition to the modern forms is misguided, given the fact that it does not foster regional identity.

In his essay 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures' [1961], Paul Ricoeur states that *everything depends on the capacity of regional culture to recreate a rooted tradition while appropriating foreign influences at a level of both culture and civilization* [Ricoeur in Nesbitt, 1996:471].

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Critical Assertion

The solution lies in the ability of communities to reassess traditional constructs in a new era, and to steer regional architecture in a direction that is of its time yet reflective of a cognitive past. They then cease to become adoptive but rather, adaptive. The transformation, commonly termed critical regionalism, looks critically at

dated methods, refining them to reapply them to renewed circumstances.

Architect and lecturer at the University of Pretoria, Barbra P Jekot echoes the sentiments of this author in her paper 'The coexistence of the 'third' and the 'first' world in South African architecture' [Jekot, 2007]. She discusses how the 'first' and 'third' worlds can work together in sharing information and knowledge, where skills are pooled and the resultant architecture is *rooted and functionally relevant*. She highlights the importance of looking into factors shaping the identity of specific regions and how architecture can be viewed as the material expression of different cultures. More pointedly, she sees architecture as *the most evident, substantial and tangible manifestation of life and culture*. She states furthermore that *it is necessary to build significant buildings to articulate regional architecture so that the expression may be*

sufficiently forceful to catch people's attention and provide a climate for developing design. Her profound views speak directly to the intentions of the proposed scheme, where location has thus defined the nature of architecture.

In her paper 'On Performative Regionalism' [Allen in Canizaro, 2007:420], Barbara Allen sees the way forward as design being informed by 90% cultural practices and 10% style, where the perspective is constituted by how people live their lives as opposed to how they appear. She states *what is needed in architecture and urban design are more robust tools for understanding the intersection of cultural practices and how they inform their regional places* [Allen in Canizaro, 2007:420].

Apart from economically empowering the disenfranchised peoples, the framework aims to critically re-evaluate vernacular design and traditional uses of materials and building methods to develop an architectural language reminiscent of handed-down cultural nuances.

At the same time the proposal is on par with contemporary architecture, and is representative of the regional identity. In this way a model of local architecture that reignites community pride in a renewed architectural identity can be established.

In its re-evaluation of traditional architectural language from a critical-regionalist design approach the hotel/lodge is set against a multitude of influences to propose a renewed archetype that the locals can take inspiration from. It aims to be appropriately responsive to climatic conditions and the building of the dam as an agent of change in the regional environment.

It also aims to be mindful of available materials, and the needs, desires and aspirations as well as current lifestyles of the local people. It will derive inspiration from current models of traditional architectural language and reinterpret them from a critical-regionalist perspective to reinforce and further develop a local identity.

In his book 'A pattern language' [1977], Christopher Alexander states his belief that patterns define towns or communities. However, these patterns are developed over time, "gradually designed in such a way that every individual act is always helping to create or generate a larger global pattern". His view in respect of the intervention can be summarised as follows:

Larger city patterns are built up from the grass roots, where communities govern themselves in the context of identifiable places, i.e. identifiable neighbourhoods with defined boundaries. Neighbourhoods are thus connected to one another by ring roads and a network of pedestrian routes on a human scale, and on a larger scale, a web of transport facilities and minibuses. The character of the local environment is defined by the height of the buildings as well as by its sacred sites. Spaces between communities should form

local centres of activity and trade and, in some instances, working spaces. This would form a necklace of community projects, perhaps a local town hall, a market space and a health centre. These small community-generated initiatives alleviate the red tape associated with larger government implemented initiatives. Also, public green spaces, small public squares and quiet areas should be included, along with play spaces, local sports facilities, public open space and grave sites in between clusters of buildings. Residual spaces in between the cracks thus become meaningful. The arrangement of buildings should be determined by the circulation patterns of the community. Fixing the position of each of these buildings according to the nature of the site, while taking trees, quality of light and public / private interface into consideration, would create a unity of building and environment.

Care should be taken to nurture residual spaces and utilise them for paths, arcades or activity pockets and ensure that they relate well to the building entrance and correspond with the desired intimacy gradient.

Further on Alexander addresses the more intimate elements of household formation that are not addressed by the broad framework but implied in the space planning of the hotel/lodge.

Kevin Lynch made a seminal contribution to the field of city planning through empirical research on how individuals perceive and navigate the urban landscape.

In his book, 'The Image of the City' [1960], he sets out guidelines that addresses the patterns outlined by Christopher Alexander.

paths- the streets, sidewalks, trails, and other channels in which people travel;

edges- perceived boundaries such as walls, buildings, and shorelines;

districts- relatively large sections of the city distinguished by some identity or character;

nodes- focal points, intersections or loci

landmarks- readily identifiable objects which serve as reference points.

Alexander and Lynch's principles provide guiding mechanisms to developing environments.

Through these principles, designers are made aware of elements that define and give meaning to a place. By identifying and nurturing those elements- as guided- development the environment should in effect, still retain its defining qualities.

The work of architect Peter Rich, who, throughout his career has collaborated closely with communities in a southern African / African context, serves as a precedent for the proposed project. He reinterprets African elements in a contemporary way, with specific reference to Ndebele architecture.

From articles on Peter Rich one can discern the depth of his understanding of architecture that promotes the formation of identity. According to Rich, the future of development in rural and undeveloped urban environments lies in extensive community consultation – *the people's voice must be heard* [Davie, 2005]. The architecture should be simple and should echo that of the people, while being mindful to provide public spaces. Furthermore, intermediary spaces such as back and front yards are an integral feature of houses. Relating to the front yard in a more public way, seating against walls create

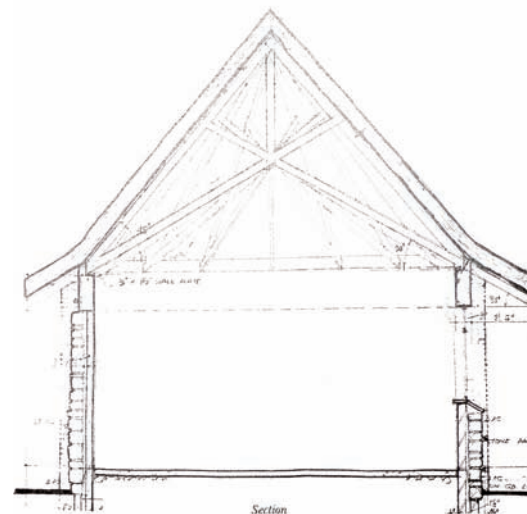
areas for socializing reminiscent of structures in a rural setting. Rich's perspective recalls urban design lectures held by Gary White at the University of Pretoria, in which he provided keen insight into how the built structure of informal settlements was congruent with the immediate needs and social structure of the people in the area. These settlements predominantly feature footpaths familiar to the residents, as they have no need for cars or roads, complemented with nodes that respond to a public transport system. Also, front yards with shade netting correspond with Rich's ideas. The initial opinion of the author had not recognized that this was indeed a response to socio-economic circumstances as experienced by the people. Choice of materials was limited by their economic feasibility as well as availability. Consultation with residents of Phomolong, an informal settlement in Mamelodi, revealed that their structures were made to be

temporary or easily dismantled in anticipation of relocation under state subsidized housing policy. Residents want to be able to disassemble their current home and re-erect it in the location of their new home, or possibly in their back yards, to be leased out for an additional income.

Architecture would then have a part to play in refining this approach by proposing inexpensive ways to enrich and re-invent the current responses of the people. The proposed response would in turn have to be cognizant of the people's way of life and thus formative of identity under the prevalent circumstances. The relation between identifiable space and how meaning is threaded into it is of critical importance.

During the 1960's, and through an empirical approach of direct observation, architect Peter Hancock was able to adapt to Lesotho's milieu, without being theoretically bound by the

Modern Movement or any other dictum. He used traditional motifs of round huts and high-peaked thatched roofs to define a national identity, creating an architecture with which the people of Lesotho can readily identify [Beck, 1985:16].



In later years, architect Iain Lowe's vocabulary was largely influenced by the works of Mario Botta. Botta's formal concerns were underpinned by the development of vernacular masonry techniques. This appeared to be an appropriate model for an architect working in Lesotho, with its own vernacular stone masonry tradition. Lowe used concrete blocks or bricks, and rubble stone infill according to availability [as indicated overleaf]. *His work powerfully expresses the rationalisation of construction techniques, giving a dignity and presence to buildings in a context outside of civic traditions. And he does this with the most meagre financial resources. The significance he imbues his school buildings with is an important factor to a people whose existence is minimal, and who therefore depend increasingly on education to improve their lives. Lowe's rationalism is not just a matter of developing a vocabulary of forms; it goes*

Figure 016. [LEFT]
"Leribe Market"

to the core of how to make cheap buildings, how to use unskilled labour and in the process transform them into skilled artisans, how to provide maximum space with a minimal budget, how to build up an architectural style based on constructive logic which can be copied and introduced into the local vernacular. It also allows him scope to play and experiment. His work demonstrates what can be accomplished from very limited resources with a clear theoretical / ideological position, clear formal concepts, a willingness to experiment and a cogent understanding of environmental factors [Beck, 1985:14]. This forms a sound basis for the practice of critical regionalism.

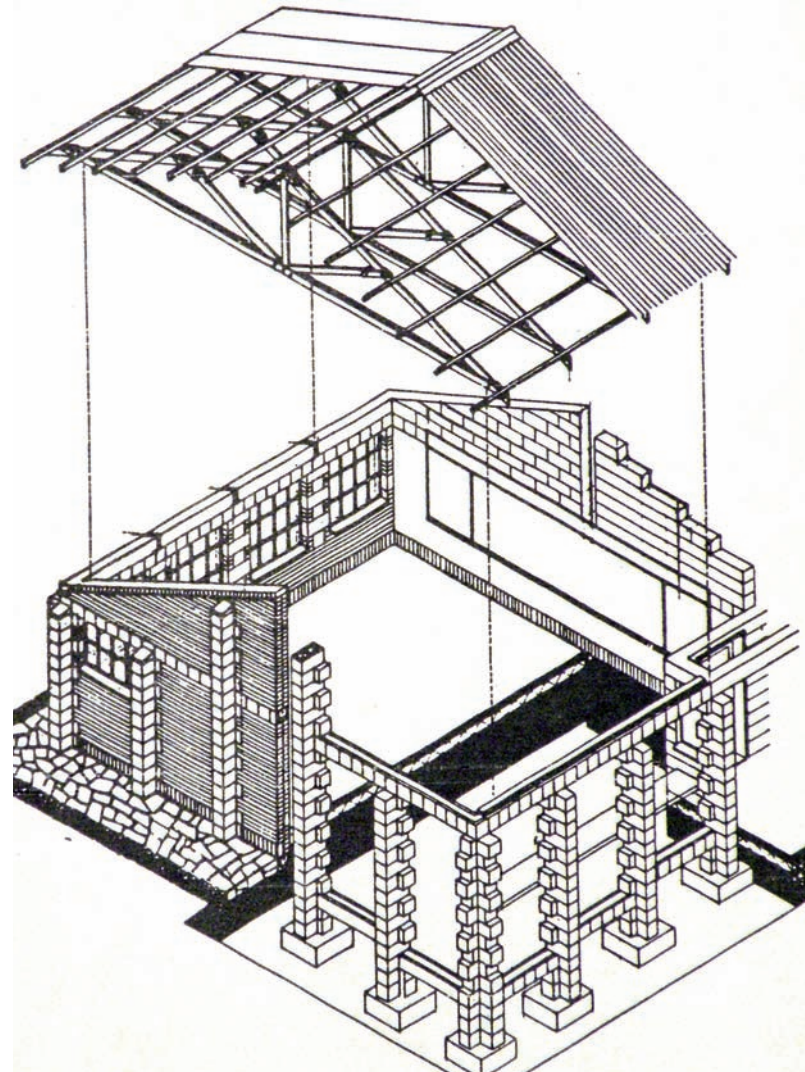
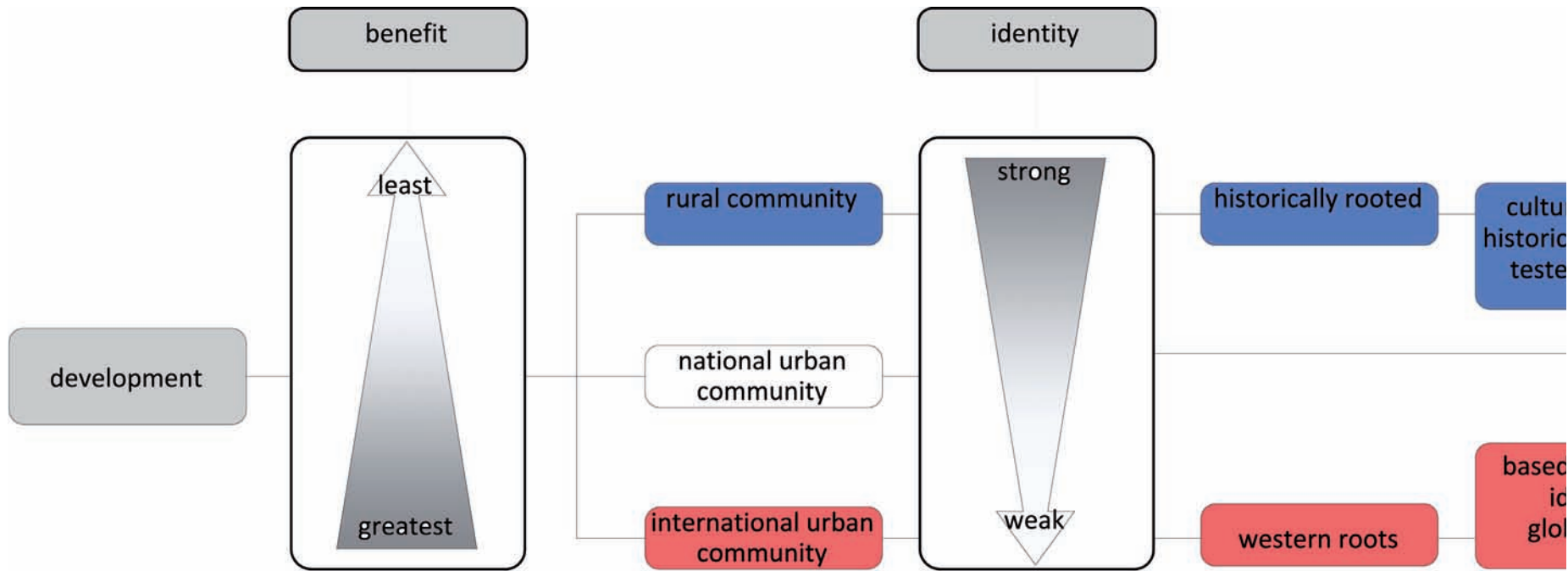


Figure 017. [RIGHT]
“Lesotho Schools Programme”

Overleaf, the theoretical approach is outlined in diagrammatic format so to best understand the application of theory to the project.



culturally based,
historically tried and
tested methods

national pride



based in western
ideals on
globalization

innovation
efficiency



appropriate regional
architecture