

"All architecture is shelter, all great architecture is the design of space that contains, cuddles, exalts, or stimulates the persons in that space."

-Phillip Johnson  
(<http://thinkexist.com>)



Fig. 1.1 Urban Scene

# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT **01**

## Normative Position

Government buildings currently act as strong commoditized components placed in the urban fabric that do not have much interaction with their context. They purely fulfill a mono-functional need that often results in an introspective architecture.

These buildings seem to rehash the same spatial failures and norms due to a seeming lack of focus on the connection between the building and its immediate environment, namely the street edge and block context. According to various interviews conducted by the author, employees from different

government departments expressed their satisfaction with the internal functioning and general aesthetic appeal of the newer buildings; however, architecture should never be mono-functional, it should synthesize multiple requirements into a single built product that defines the in between spaces rather than standing as an abrupt entity within a dysfunctional locale (Frederick. 2007, 7).

Given that each government department fulfills a very specific function, this does not rule out the opportunity to engage with the urban context and allow for other uses

to compliment the primary use and fulfill auxiliary needs in a symbiotic relationship as mixed-use buildings.

Government buildings therefore fail to provide the cohesion synonymous with Government vision of solidarity, in that the existing building stock fails to contribute to the unification of individual departments with the urban fabric within which they are located. This leaves users of the urban environment in a disconnected state of being caught in between the street and the building experience.



## Current Condition

A cursory analysis of five recent buildings within the CBD, namely the Department of Minerals and Energy, the Department of Health, the department of Public Service and Administration, the Department of Basic Education as well as the New National Library, all highlight common flaws, namely that the street edge is either dead or poorly engaged. Given that the safety of the interiors of departments needs to be addressed, a complete exclusion of the street connection where a strong exclusionary message is sent with either stark strong walls or fences. Where entrances are off the street they pose an uninviting front for example, the Batho Pele House (Fig. 1.6) or a tedious

ascent to an elevated entrance space that disconnects the user at eye level in the case of the National Library (Fig. 1.4) With this lack of street connection the user is predisposed to reading a strong, albeit unintended message of exclusion (Bonta, JP.28). Buildings therefore read as non-negotiable objects within the landscape and create a general feeling of disorientation.

**Fig. 1.3 Department of Minerals and Energy**  
 An Invaluable opportunity has been missed to engage with the pedestrianised street edge. The building is impenetrable on street level, which makes it a non-negotiable to the passer by. In invaluable opportunity to engage with the quieter street and adjacent open corner in the foreground has been missed.



**Fig. 1.4 New National Library**  
 The street condition on either side of this corner is defined by dark walls, which creates a vacuum of experience for the user. The bold ramp on the corner invites the pedestrian a semi-public platform, which is disconnected from the street due to its set back and height. As a result the semi-public intermediate space becomes quiet due its initial interface.



## Design Problem

Government buildings should be the flagships of urban regeneration. Their response to the urban condition should provide accessibility, legibility and security to internal users as well as users on street level. The emphasis should be removed from the building as an object and rather placed on the creation of the architectural experiential milieu that has a strong relationship with its urban environment. The needs generated within these environments should catalyze economic growth and urban development rather than impede it. Although the architectural typology of the government building remains mono-functional at its core, ancillary functions should be accommodated

for in mixed-use precincts where specific Government departments act as the nuclei for urban environments.

The current condition of abrupt thresholds between the public and private realms should be mediated with an introduction of an “in between” urbanity between these two extremes. This can be done through visual connections, level differences and intermediate spaces that encourage communal interaction and activate the landmark character of the public architecture, thus reinforcing their sense of place and prominence within the urban fabric.

**Fig. 1.5 Department of Health**

This corner is confronted by a very bold fence which leaves the user to feel isolated on the street and quite unsafe. The glazed building that is out of proportion with its immediate context adds to this negative feeling.



**Fig. 1.6 Department of Public Service and Administration**

The building presents a monotonous façade with a white painted steel fence to a blank street. The passer by has no reason to stop, even just to admire the experience. The entrance to the building is reminiscent of a back ally club and makes the user feel excluded, even from the public realm outside the building. Beyond the doors, is a cavernous and uninviting entrance lobby.



## Aims of Study

The public face of government departments need to be reconsidered to aid urban renewal and revitalization. New buildings should be treated in such a way as to revitalize the Pretoria inner city. The sense of place of the existing government precincts should be reinforced with a number of auxiliary functions acting as infill blocks within the various functional and departmental sectors.

Government departments and their architecture need to be re-evaluated in terms of their contribution toward the favorable urban condition.



**Fig. 1.7 Department of Basic Education**

An opportunity to define the corner architecturally has been deferred in favour of an inaccessible open space. This is a useless space as the fence causes the sidewalk to become just another dusty corridor between removed activities





The following are the various research methodologies that were employed to inform the design process:

### **Study of precedents**

Through the study of precedents relating to various aspects of the design the flaws and strengths of various architectural and urban design schemes are highlighted, thereby giving guidance as to what interventions are necessary to solve the current problem of mono-functional government architecture

### **Interviews and Demographic Analysis**

The needs of various government departments within the study area were determined through individual interviews with civil servants working for the various departments in close proximity to the identified site. Also, the needs of the various demographic groups that use the city were accounted for, as this informs the interaction on street level. This was done through prescriptive questioning as well as observation of various peoples.

### **Historical Method**

As this project sits in a historically rich precinct, the layers of history act as design informants, and in large part, inform much of the significance of the urban space, the significance and integration of existing as well as the design of the thesis project itself.

### **Theoretical Research Method.**

In order to deal with the perceived failures of the “pseudo-modern” blocks, appropriate counter arguments are formulated to avert the failures of modernist urbanism.