ThIS Africa

Giving form to the InFormal

by Nonkululeko Grootboom

Formal Signs...Forms and Signs

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Giving form to the InFormal

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ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:

Claiming space

Defining space

Multifunctional

Space defining elements

Form giving

The thesis entitled “This is Africa giving form to the informal” arose from a concern with the growing levels of poverty and unemployment in South Africa and the recognition that small scale, self-generated economic activity provides an important means of survival for the very poor. It acknowledges the positive contributions that informal street trading makes to the urban environment.

The dissertation draws upon a study of recently initiated projects that aimed to legitimise informal trading, by integrating it in the built environment. It is also driven by a study of the way in which traders organise, claim and define space in the urban environment. This process can be seen as the way in which traders themselves seek legitimacy. Collectively, case studies revealed a number of key elements necessary for the legitimisation of informal trade.

Although the area of the proposed intervention is the Pretoria Station precinct, the study acknowledges that there are universal elements contained in informal trading. These elements establish a set of principles that define the minimal intervention necessary in order to allow opportunities for trade to as many people as possible whilst giving the traders themselves the maximum possible room to manoeuvre. In essence, the approach does not argue for the formalisation or ‘neatening’ of informal activity, but aims to give form to activities frequently regarded as illegal, and to provide street market spaces that can function as essential forms of urban infrastructure (Dewar 1990:xi).

ABSTRAK

SLEUTELWOORDE:

Toe-eiening van ruimte

Definiering van ruimte

Meerdoeligheid

Elemente wat ruimte definieer

Vormgewing

Hierdie skripsie getiteld “This is Africa giving form to the informal” het ontstaan uit ‘n besorgdheid oor die groeiende vlakke van armoede en werkloosheid in Suid-Afrika, en die besef dat kleinskaalse, self-ontwikkelde ekonomiese werksaamhede ‘n belangrike manier van oorlewing vir die erg armes is. Dit erken die positiewe bydraes wat informele straathandel tot die stadsomgewing maak.

Die skripsie word ontleen aan ‘n studie van onlangse projekte wat daarop gemik was om informele handel wettig te verklaar. Dit word ook aangedryf deur ‘n studie van die manier waarop handelaars op stedelike ruimtes aanspraak maak, en hierdie ruimtes organiseer en definieer. Hierdie proses kan gesien word as die wyse waarop handelaars legitimiteit nastreef. Gesamentlik het hierdie gevallestudies ‘n aantal sleutelelemente uitgelig wat nodig is vir die legitimisering van informele handel.

Hoewel die ligging van die voorgestelde ingryping die Pretoria Stasie-gebied is, erken die studie dat daar universele elemente aan informele handel gekoppel kan word. Hierdie elemente bring ‘n reeks beginsels tot stand wat die minimum ingryping bepaal wat nodig sou wees om handelsgeleenthede aan die meeste mense moontlik te verskaf, terwyl die handelaars self so veel as moontlik beweegruimte gebied word. In wese bepleit die benadering nie die formalisering of ‘netjies maak’ van informele werksaamhede nie, maar het dit ten doel om vorm te gee aan aktiwiteite wat dikwels as onwettig beskou word, en om straatmarkruimtes te bied wat as noodsaaklike vorme van die stedelike infrastruktuur kan funksioneer.

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DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

"Design is the effort to make product in such a way that they are useful to people. It is more rational than irrational, optimistic and projected toward the future rather than redesigned, cynical and indifferent. Design means being steadfast and progressive rather than escaping and giving up..."(Krippendorff & Butter 2003:210)

DESIGN

In their essay, "Product Semantics: Exploring the Symbolic Qualities of Form," Klaus Krippendorff and Reinhart Butter (2003:209-210), describe design as being, in its broadest sense, the act of consciously developing forms to serve human needs. In order to develop these forms, designers need to become critics of civilisation, technology and society; and then transpose these insights into three-dimensional objects.

INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

The fundamental task of interior architects is to design forms to support people, their activities and aspirations, derived from an exploration of the relationship between space, user and object in order to create legible environments and evoke feeling. According to Roberto J. Rengel (2007:9) this is done by cultivating an appreciation and understanding of the types of rituals and events associated with the project. By listening, observing, and most of all, exposing oneself to the realities of those who use the spaces, designers acquire the insights and sensibilities necessary to inform their designs. In this vein, individual activities become subplots of the entire environmental experience. The experiences of people approaching, arriving, moving, interacting and performing tasks become events with important design implications. Rituals that are performed routinely, as well as those performed for specific occasions and vary from time to time - their effect on the surroundings - all affect the total experience that people have in space.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE?

This project has been developed from a study of how individuals utilise space and objects and their connection with surrounding forms. However in this context, the space which they occupy is not defined by solid enclosure on all four sides. The site is a streetscape, a context in which space and subspaces are defined by elements that are fixed as well as those that are manipulated through use. Streetscape design has been the design domain of architects, landscape architects and urban designers, in many instances it has been treated and viewed as the empty space leftover from buildings. However these spaces are never truly empty and always embody meaning for the individuals that move through them.

The most strongly defined boundaries along the streetscape are those defined by architectural forms. According to Habraken (1998:132) all forms, both natural and built, offer potential boundaries and inhabitants use architecture to define territorial boundaries. Inhabitants also use lower level objects in relation to architectural form in order to increase their territorial claim. For instance shopkeepers often claim pavement space outside their shops by the placement of wares, thus increasing their territorial boundary. Musicians often stand against a pillar placing a hat in front of them; passersby understand and respect the use of a token to stake a territorial claim, and enter this zone now and then to toss a coin. This territory may only be claimed for a few hours, but whilst it lasts, it creates an increase in territorial depth in the environment (Habraken 1998:160).

"Territory interprets architecture, but by no means in strict obeisance to it." (Habraken 1998:132)

In its most basic form, territory however temporary or transparent, is claimed by the human body. Being in public space involves an agreement to partake in a game of territorial configurations. Territories shift as people use objects, sit on benches, stand on the pavement or even enter sub spaces as is done when using a public telephone, where a unit of space is claimed by the telephone booth. Whilst in public space, individuals make momentary spatial claims that follow the flow of use within the given context (Habraken 1998:160).

Traditionally interior architecture is practiced within an architectural envelope and is tasked with articulating the territory of a client. Using surfaces, walls and plains the interior architect indicates to the user how the space may best be used, which zones are private and which are public and which surfaces impart information. After a few years, the environment may be altered to suit the needs of a different client. Thus, even in the formal realm there are temporary territorial claims. Using their skills, the interior architect is tasked with assisting a client to claim their territory and make them identifiable and unique in the environment using devices such as branding. Essentially, even in the formal realm, the interior architect aids in claiming space and making it useful.

In the streetscape the realm of informal traders needs to be articulated. A reading and interpretation of the common traits of street traders - their space defining elements as well as their interaction with the spatial environment gave rise to the belief that traders and street users alike seek formal signs – or forms and signs – that they can relate to in the urban environment. Informal traders seek these signs in order to enforce a sense of legitimacy (Habraken 1998:227).

> *"In contemporary society, all citizens seek to settle in environments in which they "belong" and this is done by reading formal signs within a fabric in order to determine to what we may potentially relate (Habraken 1998:227).*

Therefore this study aims to create a system to which traders and street users alike can relate. A study of local urban contexts as well as recently initiated projects that aimed to integrate traders in urban environment revealed a number of key elements necessary for legitimisation of informal trade (refer to page 88). These systems, patterns and types are not recipes to be repeated but simply provide a framework of recognisable forms within which variations may be made. They are forms that may be appropriated and improvised upon to make new instances. According to Habraken (1998:230), variations within a theme enable individuals to define themselves within the context of a given group or society. The theme connects the user and society within a given context. According to him, in each variation, "we conform in order to create'.

Thus, this thesis aims to be the beginings of creating a system that legitimises informal traders, allows them to claim space in a legible environment, whilst allowing them room to manoeuvre within the system.

"Human beings seek signs of formal coherence among grouped artefacts, overlaying comprehensible structure on seemingly random form." (Habraken 1998:227)

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