



THEORETICAL INVESTIGATION

# Afrocentrism in architecture

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this investigation is to establish whether African philosophical thought can inform a contemporary architectural language with real cross-cultural dialogue, in a global context.

Post-apartheid South Africa is currently in the process of formulating a new identity, which, due to the multifarious cultural context, is an arduous task indeed. Since national identity is still a theoretical concept with big ambitions, South Africa is currently stuck in a grey area with regard to identity. Urban space in post-apartheid South Africa is a direct reflection of this “identity crisis”, in that it may be characterised, according to Bert Olivier (2004: 63) as “variegated, unstable and precarious”, with reference to where “discourses of security, fortification and crime intersect with continuing practises of segregation”. The purpose of this dissertation is to prove that architecture has a major role to play in the cultural liberation of South Africa and as vehicle for social change, thus imparting enormous ethical responsibility on architects and urban planners

in designing urban landscapes that emanate real cross-cultural dialogue in order to have an effect on national consciousness. In failing to do so, South African urban space will continue to fragment, segregate and communicate socio-economic inequity.

Even though South African identity may still be a theoretical concept, in essence it is an identity born and firmly rooted in Africa - an African identity. It is important to note that national identity is the product of the search for subnational, personal and international identity. The purpose of this investigation is not an attempt to explore the concept of national identity beyond the notion that South African identity is inherently African, but also modern in the larger global context, thus not rejecting “western” vehicles of thought.

The dissertation will criticise contemporary South African architecture (“stylistically” foreign and uncontextual design) in proving that architecture is a signifier of meaning, a means for communicating identity and a possible vision for tomorrow. Subsequently, for architecture to be the physical embodiment of these concepts and serve as a vehicle for social change, it is important for South African architects to make Africa herself their school.

The dissertation will deduce that the African philosophical concept of ubuntu is, in essence, the foundation and edifice of African identity, and investigate how architecture, through the concept of ubuntu, is a concrete manifestation to the understanding of the forces that animate the world. In other words, it will investigate architecture’s duty in making visible

how the world touches us.

The dissertation will then explore the idea that abstraction in architecture, in an attempt to enlighten, has to give opportunity to hybrids of multiple readings to arise. As thus, as result, a contemporary architectural language of rich ambiguity, in the sense that it does not serve one specific cultural faction, or too impartial that it could exist anywhere. This idea will be explored by means of investigating the architectural projects of respected South African architect, Fanuel Motsepe, and internationally acclaimed Mozambican architect, Amancio Guedes. The investigation will then explore the importance of context-informed design as written by American architect, Steven Holl, in his widely acclaimed book *Anchoring* (1992), and the significance of this in the South African context.

## ARCHITECTURE IN CONVERSATION

“You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build house and palaces. That is construction. Ingenuity is at work. But suddenly, you touched my heart, you do me good. I am happy and I say: ‘this is beautiful.’ This is architecture. Art enters in”.

LeCorbusier Towards a new architecture 1927

In proving that the possibility of designing meaningful architectural identity in a multifarious cultural context, which simultaneously reflects contemporary South African society and instils vision for the future does exist, the importance of proving that architecture signifies more than merely shelter cannot be overemphasised.

Architecture is a signifier of

meaning – it has associative values and symbolic content, subject to personal and cultural interpretation, which is a product of time, history and culture. Architecture does not merely facilitate purpose in combining form and space into a single essence – it also communicates meaning (Ching 1996: 374). South African settler architecture is associated with an excess of meaning for the Afrikaner culture, for example revealing the hardship, courage and desperation of a bygone era, reminder of the fight for independence and hard-won Africanity.

Architecture reflects identity – it is the silent testimony that verifies the personal, corporate and national character portrayed to the world. It reflects our ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, power or economic hardship – architecture reflects society. Colonialist architectural ideologies

served as an instrument of oppression and post colonialist nations often use architecture as a tool for formulating national identity and unity (FIG. 2.2) (Elleh 2001: 235). Contemporary South African architecture is in many instances a vehicle of bourgeois ambitions, in the sense that it represents the power, wealth and “good taste” of the client. Subsequently, in order for architecture to communicate identity, it becomes imperative for architectural language to be formulated from within the culture it represents.

Design professionals are ethically obligated to design buildings and urban landscapes that signify meaning to and reflect identity of the culture with which it is in conversation. In failing to meet this prerequisite, the urban landscape will become foreign and insignificant. Contemporary South African

urban architecture, for the most part, is removed and distant from the user – it is characterised by stylistic borrowings from foreign countries and cultures and has become pervasively banal. Walking through one of the many macro-scale housing or corporate park developments in the eastern suburbs of Pretoria reminds us of somewhere ... nowhere, rich in chic architectural fashions and fads – past identities of foreign contexts. South African architect Alan Lipman questions in his book, *Architecture on my mind: critical readings in design*, “Whose memories do such buildings stir, whose nostalgias do they gratify, whose cultural roots do they acknowledge?” These buildings are monuments to architectural individuality.

How do we escape this prevailing plethora of uncontextual placelessness, this architectural identity crisis? First, and foremost, it is imperative for architects and urban planners to become part of and understand contemporary South African (national) identity, where national identity may be seen as a product of local, personal and international identity. Pinpointing national identity in the multifarious cultural context of South Africa is a crucial, but daunting task indeed. Furthermore, “identity is a subject-

tive self-concept or social role and, as such, is often variable, overlapping and situational”, as Lawrence Vale (In Alsayyad 1992: 320) remarks. Identity in architecture is often the product of the identity bias of the client, the architect’s personal design agenda and the dominant/ruling cultural component (Ibid). In order to design architecture of meaning, in which South Africa’s diverse population can find identity, the most important factor influencing architectural identity should be the fact that South Africa is foremost an African country, and should epitomise that.

Secondly, it is important for South African designers to embrace the country’s history – meaning and identity is embedded in her urban and natural landscapes. It is important to note that (in formulating an architectural language with real cross-cultural dialogue, which acknowledges the diverse histories and cultures) architecture should never be a “return to the timeless tradition” of a golden age before the advent of colonialism (Wright 2001: 228, 230). On the other hand, if architecture is too far abstracted from known reference points, it might be rejected, or worse, ignored (Alsayyad 1992: 331).

Thirdly, architecture that signifies meaning and reflects identity should communicate possibilities for the future – of what might be. Such architecture is robust and able to change with the rapidly changing society around it, subsequently not becoming a frozen moment in political or cultural history. It is clear that architecture of meaning, in which a diverse culture can find identity while simultaneously communicating future possibilities, can be created. Architecture is more than merely shelter – it conveys meaning and represents the identity of its users and the society around it. The apparent architectural “identity crisis” in South Africa is merely a poor excuse for substandard, meaningless and foreign architecture.



FIG. 2.2 Tent-like forms of Jorn Utzon’s Kuwait National Assembly Building. Photo by Lawrence Vale (Alsayyad 1992: 319)

## I SMELL, I DANCE THE OTHER. I AM.

Traditional African art and architecture is a concrete manifestation to the understanding of the forces that animate the world; the physical embodiment of desires, motives and feelings (Senghor 1965: 83). (Okay, so what, how does this differ from the Western world view, do not all art convey messages of desires, motives and feelings?) African art and architecture is collective, it commits the person, not just the individual, through and in the community (Ibid). In order to form a better understanding of this notion, this investigation will explore the African philosophical concept of ubuntu and the way it manifested in traditional South African architecture. As mentioned in the introduction, the African philosophical concept of ubuntu is, essentially, the “foundation and edifice” of African identity (Ramose 2002: 230). Therefore it is important to explore this con-

cept in order to design contemporary urban space, which manifests South African identity. Due to the enormous diversity in architectural practices in pre-industrial South Africa, and in an attempt not to prove bias towards one specific cultural component, this investigation will explore certain characteristics that prove common to all traditional architectural practices in South Africa.

Yvonne Makgoro (in Lange 1998: 51) defines the concept of ubuntu, in its most basic sense, as being a metaphor in a society where “a human being is a human being because of other human beings”. The existence and well being of the individual is relative to that of the group. As mentioned previously, traditional African architecture is collective and aims to commit the person in and through the community (Senghor 1965: 83). Char-

acteristically, villages consisted of a collection of similar buildings linked together, which served as an outward manifestation of the community’s identity. Architecture was integral to the total social and spatial system of the community (Rapport 1965: 69).

Amancio D.M. Guedes (Gerneke in SA Architect 1999: 30) enquired, “What is the idea greater than the sight? When will architects start wanting people in their buildings?” Pre-industrial African art and architecture was characteristically functional, and art for art’s sake was a foreign concept (“all art is social”), as beauty is a product of “goodness and effectiveness” and imparts “the promise for happiness” (Senghor 1965: 83). Functional beauty. Functional in the sense that architecture was responsive to specific social needs reflected through supple conceptions of com-

position, interconnection and movement through space (Wright 2001: 228). The word “supple” is used here to describe the architecture’s adjustable and adaptive qualities in order to accommodate social needs; people-orientated design.

Ubuntu is in reality two words, where “ubu-“ is the essence of being, thus ontological, and “-ntu” the point in reference when being becomes a physical manifestation, thus epistemological. “Ubu-ntu” is the inseparable entirety of African ontology and epistemology (Ramose 2002: 231). As a result, in order for the concept of ubuntu to manifest in architecture (which is a physical embodiment of African identity), a spiritual response to the African context and an emotional connection to the land and its cultures are crucial (Du Plessis 2001: 49). Man and nature is interdependent due to the force vitale

or living force that links all animate and material phenomena (Murray 1991: 31). Pre-industrial South African architecture was characteristically unobtrusive and in balance with nature, as opposed to the “conquer and dominate” attitude of post-industrial western architecture towards the environment. As a result, traditional South African cultures lived lightly on the land; the land, an environment to live in and live with (Du Plessis 2001: 50).

A contemporary architectural language, which gives physical manifestation to the understanding of the South African identity, can only be formulated in and as a product of Africa. The philosophical concept of ubuntu may be seen as the essence of African identity and therefore crucial in the design of a pure South African architectural expression of cross-cultural

dialogue. Subsequently, the importance of this concept and its significance with regard to urban space cannot be overemphasised and, in failing to do so, may lead to blank architecture in African drag.

Key words: functional people-orientated; spiritual response to the land; beauty; collective; responsive; adjustable; contextual.



## FABRICATING PLURALISM

Abstraction in architecture, in an attempt to enlighten, has to give opportunity for hybrids of multiple readings to arise. The result: a contemporary architectural language of rich ambiguity, in the sense that it doesn't serve one specific cultural faction, or too impartial that it could exist anywhere (Alsayyad 1992: 331). This chapter will investigate the prospect of successfully designing hybrid architecture in which a multifarious society can relate identity, by means of studying contemporary projects by architects that attempted to manifest this notion through design (successfully and unsuccessfully). The investigation will explore the architectural projects by means of evaluating the degree to which the concept of ubuntu attains physical manifestation (by means of the abstract architectural concepts discussed in the previous chapter) in accordance

with modernity. Modernity refers to modern in the sense of "being western (in order to attain international relevance) without depending on the west" as quoted by Lawrence Vale (1992: 327).

**PRECEDENT STUDY:** Development proposal for the planned Gauteng provincial government precinct, Fanuel Motsepe (principle architect) in association with NOA Architects; Beyers Naude Square, Johannesburg CBD initiated in November 2003.

The purpose of the intended development is threefold. 1) The main objective is to centralise the Gauteng government's departments (presently scattered throughout the city) around a New Heritage Square. The proposed development will ensure that Johannesburg, as the financial powerhouse of South Africa, becomes a world class African city. 3) The proposed development will be

an architectural environment that fosters cultural integration and a space for shared exchanges (Davies 2004).

The controversial design proposal put forward by respected Johannesburg architect, Fanuel Motsepe, ignited heated debates regarding the intersection of cultural representation with post-apartheid space making in South Africa. The proposal for the New Heritage Square includes an urban entertainment hall that introduces elements and values of indigenous architecture expressed in a 21st century design that employs modern construction technology. This proposed an urban entertainment mall (FIG. 2.5), which has the additional function of grand gateway on to the square and from the underground parking, and symbolises a traditional Tswana homestead constructed of steel and

glass. A 13 storey high symbolic obelisk rising from a fountain (FIG 2.4) will serve as the central focal point of the square, and a vast paving grid across the entire square will orientate users with true north. The design further proposes the demolition of 10 existing buildings, five of which are more than 60 years old, leaving freestanding remnants of selected facades that symbolise the rebirth of the indigenous as the modern, rising out of the ruins of the colonial past. An orientation wall will serve as a link between the old and the new facades and symbolises a window of transparency of the government on to the urban community (Ibid).

The Kopanong Gauteng Government Precinct design proposal can be characterised as a certain African particularism, relating to the traditional Tswana culture before the advent of colonialism. According to the philosophy of ubuntu, architecture, as an art, commits the person in and through the community. This makes the design vulnerable to criticism, presenting an ideology of the authentic in returning to the traditional, ignoring the multifarious nature of the city and proves bias towards one specific cultural component. The design presents the possibil-

ity of becoming a frozen moment in cultural history.

The design proposal also does not provide a spiritual response to the land, in being insensitive to the context, ignoring the fact that there is already an existing, but dysfunctional, open public space in the sense that it is largely under-utilised. The design proposes that the square doubles in size by demolishing the 10 existing buildings and, in consequence, removing the already lacking intimacy and human scale altogether.

The design is eclectically post-modern with floating signifiers all over the place: the ruined facades of the buildings he demolishes, a colonial monument isolated by drawing a circle around it and obelisk etc., and the essentially functional beauty of African art and architecture is lost. The design is in fact an incoherent collection of ideological and symbolic references that draw from a pool of pre-modern and post-modern metaphors and images.

The design does not manifest the philosophy of ubuntu in relation to the key concepts abstracted from this enquiry.

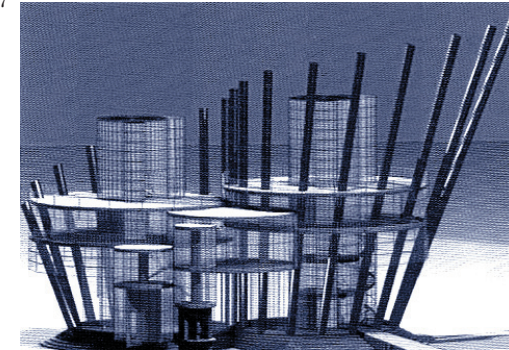


Fig. 2.3 Urban entertainment mall. architect: Fanuel Motsepe. 2005



Fig. 2.4 A thirteen storey high symbolic obelisk rising from a fountain. Architect: Fanuel Motsepe.2005

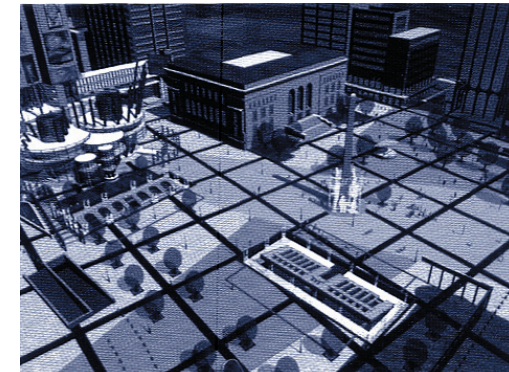


Fig. 2.5 Public Square. Architect: Fanuel Motsepe.2005

AMANCIO D'ALPOIM MIRANDA (PANCHO) GUEDES.

Pancho is considered, according to architectural historian, Udo Kultermann (2003: 21), one of the most prominent architects during the last decades in the shaping and determining of a new architecture in Africa. His work is a near perfect synthesis of modernism and Africanism, which were made manifest by a "brilliant amalgam of visionary projections and a fresh interpretation of the past" (Kultermann 2003: 20). Pancho's work included both the African culture and the possibilities that contemporary architecture provided. He understood the needs of the people he was building for. This study will include two buildings designed by Pancho Guedes, still breathing and in deep conversation with the people of Mozambique.

SMILING LION (FIG. 2.6 - 2.9), Maputo, Mozambique  
The Smiling Lion is a member of, in Pancho's words, "a bizarre and fantastic family of buildings with spikes and fangs, beams tearing into spaces around them, invented as if some parts are about to slip off and crash down, with convulsive walls and armoured lights" (Smithson 1982: 28). The Smiling Lion's programme includes six flats with

ground floor parking and servants quarters on the roof.

The floor plans can be described as uncomplicated, straightforward and functional. The sections, on the contrary, are characterised by fantastic exaggerations and triangulated geometric relief murals painted in soft oranges, whites and blacks. It is the sections and its reflections on the facades that are the architecture (Ibid). Pancho connected architecture with human emotions, giving every building an expression and character to be read by anyone who chose to be receptive. The Smiling Lion can be perceived as a supernatural being, a living personality (Ibid).

SWAZI ZIMBABWE (FIG. 2.9 & 2.10), nearly built near Nelspruit, 1960's

The design was informed by the pre-industrial tradition of Swaziland, and is a member of the family of buildings with "walls twisting and turning this way and that". The design is based on the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and consists of a number of circular units with the internal functions appropriated to the requirements of a contemporary family. With different functions of living, dining and kitchen, as well as terraces and servants rooms on the ground floor and bedrooms with

balconies on the first floor, he ingeniously reinterpreted the tradition of African architecture to a new level (Kultermann 2003: 21).

Pancho Guedes designed buildings that radiate Pan-African mysticism by uniting fantasy with a functional programme and by means of reinterpreting the African past in a new way. The specific site and every unique situation tied to it informed each project, relating to local traditions and communicating a kinship with the site's given past. The buildings are receptive to local climatic conditions and purposely allow nature to invade it, as Pancho remarked, "I have asked nature to invade architecture exuberantly as if it were a ruin" (Kultermann 2003: 21). He produced internationally acclaimed architecture with the limited materials, technology and skilled labour available.

*Building shall yet belong to the people, architecture shall yet become real and alive. and beauty shall yet be warm and convulsive.*

Pancho Guedes (Ibid).

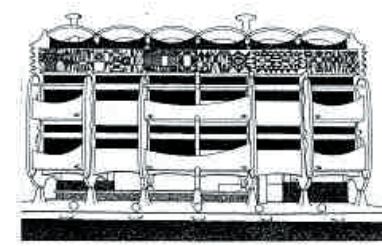


Fig. 2.6 Smiling Lion - Elevation



Fig. 2.7 Smiling Lion - Perspective

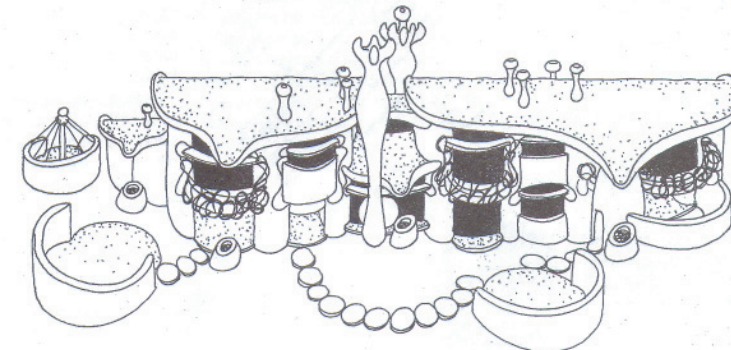


Fig. 2.9 Perspective of Swazi Zimbabwe, Goedegoen, nearly built in Nelspruit

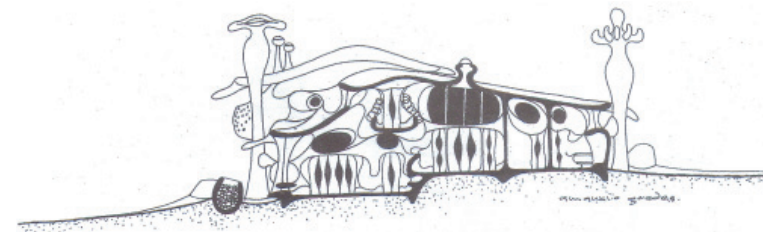


Fig. 2.10 Section of Swazi Zimbabwe, Goedegoen, nearly built in Nelspruit

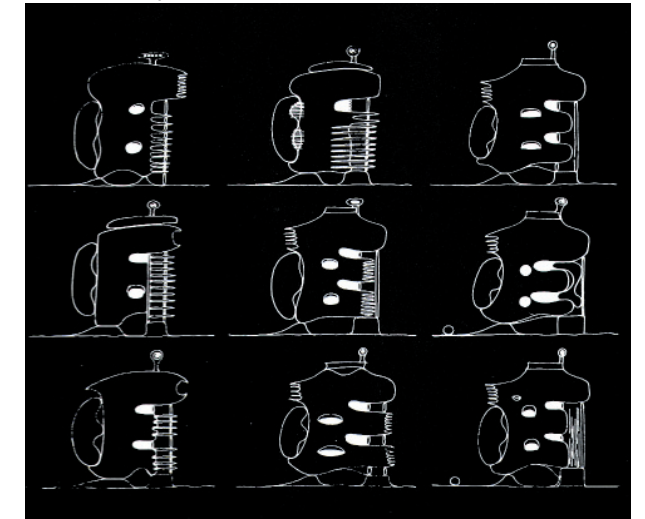


Fig. 2.8 Smiling Lion - Concept Development

*A foolish round house outside the world of money,  
My feathery hairy building.  
You, too, if you dream hard enough –  
You, too, can make half of your dream  
Come true.  
When is the building most real?  
When it is a bunch of ideas? A rough  
scribble?  
When it is many sheets of municipal  
linen prints?  
Is it when the bones are up?  
When the plastering is done?  
When the owners move in?  
When it catches fire?  
Or when the first owners move out?  
Is it not real exploding?  
Is it real riddled and shattered by  
bullets?  
Or faked new by a new owner?  
Or with broken window panes,  
haunted, in a wild and overgrown  
garden – a young gang's clubhouse.*

Poem by Pancho Guedes in an attempt to describe Swazi Zimbabwe



## ARCHITECTURE BOUND TO SITUATION

In an attempt to pinpoint the intersection of culture and building, it is important to create a hybrid with an identity unique to the circumstances of the project. These circumstances include the particulars of a given site, its history and its programme. A building's relationship with its site sets architecture apart as an art form. Site can be described as more than a mere component in the conception of a building - rather the physical and metaphysical foundation of architecture. The physical is the resolution of the functional spaces, which in turn requires the metaphysics in architecture. A building transcends physical and functional requirements by means of fusing with place and, in doing so, explains the meaning of the site. In order for architecture to explain the site, it is fundamental for the building to have an experiential connection

with its site (Holl 1991: 9).

Pre-colonial South African architecture illustrates the interdependence of building and site - being it unintentional through the use of locally available materials or an association of the landscape with historically significant events and myths. Architecture is then, according to American architect Steven Holl (Ibid), an extension establishing absolute meanings relative to a place.

The physics of architecture, the way architecture is aligned with the sun or specific views framed by an opening, enhance the experience of movement through a space that transcends architectural beauty. In effect, a phenomenological link between architecture and site is formed; architecture and nature are joined in metaphysics of place (Holl 1991: 10). Every site and

situation inherently hold the key to its own architectural language and unique materiality and form signifies meaning to a situation (Jefferson 2005: 83).

### PRECEDENT STUDY

Palazzo Del Cinema, Venice, Italy, 1990, architect: Steven Holl (FIG. 2.11)

The Venice Film Festival building proposal is situated on the Lido in Venice and celebrates the site's "watery" connection to the city by means of enlarging the lagoon to surge underneath the building. The space, homage to Venice and a place for the Lido community, is filled with diffused light from gaps in the cinemas above. This public space is intended to house retail functions along the arcade and guarantees public movement through the space during the months when there is no festival.

The design employs the notion of

time in its various abstractions to form a link between architecture and cinema. The project involves three interpretations of time and light in space.

1. Cinema has the ability to either collapse time (20 years into 1 minute) or extent time (4 seconds into 20 minutes). This collapsed or extended time is expressed in the warp and extended weave of the building.

2. Diaphanous time is expressed by means of diffused light reflected into the grand public lagoon space below the cinema.

3. Absolute time is measured in a projected beam of sunlight that inch its way through the lobby. Light in space, light in reflection and light in shadow are seen as programs to be achieved parallel to solving functional aspects. (Holl 1991: 156)

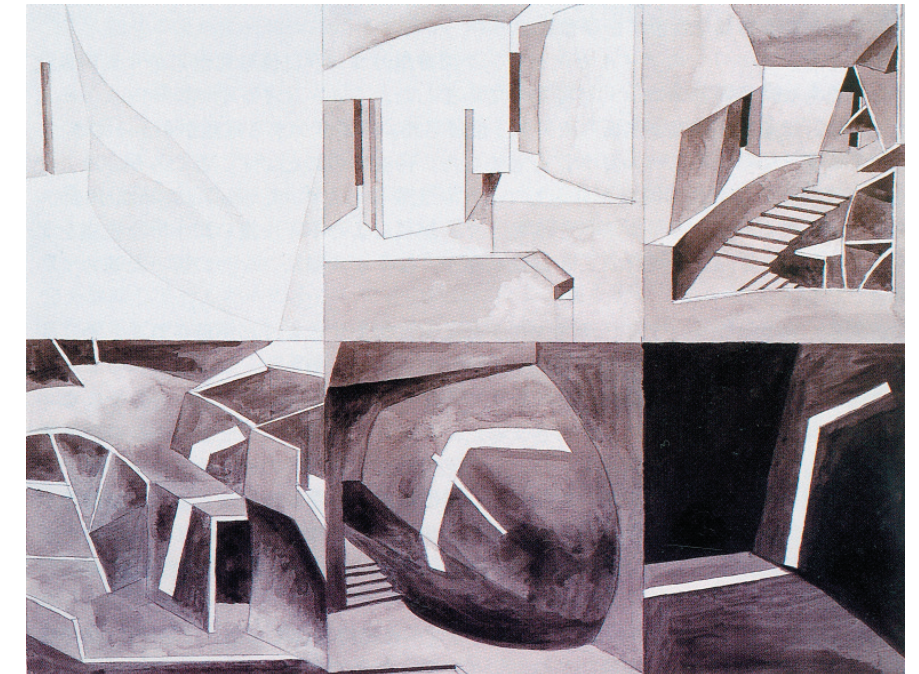


FIG 2.11 Palazzo Del Cinema - Light in time. Painting by S. Holl (1990)

## CONCLUSION

The intended purpose of the theoretical investigation set out to prove that, through the careful dissection of African philosophy, a true African architectural place theory could be formulated. It proved very difficult due to the limited amount of written records and the fact that theoreticians of western descent authored the majority of the researched material on African architectural theory. These authors are inclined to ascribe a romantic design ideology to African architecture that borders on the absurd (author's opinion). This published material either 'ascribes meaning' to elements, which does not necessarily possess inherent meaning aside from functional attributes (the philosophical significance of the tree in African culture for example) or written in colourful rhetoric<sup>1</sup>. Are our perceptions guided by these romantic illusions and does this romanticising of the exotic not

strengthen our perception of 'the other'?

Bush-architecture (light technology, adobe walls, thatch etc.) does have its merit in the South African context, but is it the only physical embodiment of a true African architectural design ideology? Is it not, in some precedents, merely a kitsch attempt to re-establish an architectural language of a golden age before the advent of colonialism? Is it not the precious vestiges of Africa ('the other') that Europeans admire and relish to explore?

The investigation attempted in isolating the facts from the romantic rhetoric. The African philosophical concept of ubuntu, the foundation and edifice of African philosophy, was applied to pre-industrial African art and architecture with the intention of abstracting a clear and defined ideological 'point of departure'

to be scrutinised, attacked and reconfigured. Furthermore, it attempted in formulating an architectural language that breaks away from 'bush-architecture' and architecture in African drag.

The application of the concept of ubuntu to pre-industrial art and architecture proved successful in the sense that certain key concepts were abstracted. These key concepts include:

Pre-industrial African society found merit in the functional beauty of art and architecture - functional beauty. Architecture was contextual and a spiritual response to the land. Art, architecture and urban design were people orientated. It related to the individual in- and through the community. Architecture was responsive, in the sense that it adapted and adjusted to occupant needs - robust.

In order for architecture to

communicate a spiritual response to the land, the importance of context (micro- and macro-) cannot be over-emphasised. Architecture is a physical manifestation of the architect's interpretation of the meaning of site; it explains the inherent meaning or metaphysics of the site to the observer.

The architectural language of the proposed project will explore the above-mentioned concepts in order to relate to the South African context. But, architecture is not an isolated art and even less so in the globally connected society of today. As result, the architectural language of the proposed project will attempt to prove relevant in the broader global context.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In describing a communal veranda of a impluvium house (West Africa) Jean-Paul Bourdier wrote in his essay entitled Dwelling

with Spirit (Dixon 1994: 98): " , which constitutes the site where regenerative interaction of air, earth, water and light is made manifest in the concept of building and dwelling. These are indeed the four fundamental elements of creation that account for the making not only of the 'earthborn and earthbound' habits of people, but also of the first human beings in West African cosmogonies".