

On the question of architecture and identity, in post-apartheid South Africa

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Considerations as to personal and group identity seem to be everywhere these days, in the national news, in the latest pop/rap video and with respect to the very clothes that we choose to wear. Significantly, in post-apartheid South Africa, topical questions of 'identity' are driven from the racial politics of our past, and are mobilised toward our need to symbolise a new inclusive space of belonging. This paper looks at ways of representing and re-imagining collective identities through architectural design – that is design as process and product alike. The paper opens by introducing our political and social context before moving to consider more theoretical questions of subjectivity and of collective identity. Where after, the paper considers how architecture might contribute to questions of identity via three related lines of enquiry: 1) democratic judgement and creative process; 2) public space, both political and architectural; 3) and lastly, tectonic materiality and cultural memory. In so doing, the paper develops its discussion in dialogue with the work – amongst others – of Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur and Couze Venn.

Key Words: architecture, identity, subjectivity, post-apartheid, Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, Couze Venn

Dit wil voorkom of persoonlike en groepsidentiteit deesdae oral is: in die nasionale nuus, in die nuuste pop/rap videos en in terme van die klere wat ons kies om te dra. Baie belangrik is die aktuele vraag oor 'identiteit', wat aangepor word deur die radikale politiek van ons verlede en ingespan word om ons behoefte om 'n nuwe ruimtelikheid van behoort, te simboliseer. Hierdie artikel kyk na wyses waarop kollektiewe identiteite uitgebeeld en heruitgebeel word deur middel van ontwerp in argitektuur – dit is, terselfdertyd ontwerp as proses en produk. Die artikel spring weg met 'n inleiding oor ons politieke en sosiale konteks voordat die fokus verskuif word na teoretiese vrae oor subjektiwiteit van die gemeenskaplike. Daarna beskou die artikel hoe argitektuur moontlik 'n bydrae lewer tot vraestukke oor identiteit deur na drie verwante rigtings van ondersoek te verwys: 1) demokratiese oordeel en die kreatiewe proses; 2) publieke ruimte, beide politiek en argitektonies; 3) and laastens, tektoniese materialiteit en kulturele onthou. Deur dit te doen, ontwikkel die artikel 'n bespreking in dialoog met onder meer die werk van Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur en Couze Venn.

Slutelwoorde: argitektuur, identiteit, subjektiwiteit, postapartheid, Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, Couze Venn

This paper concerns ways of mediating public and personal identity through architectural design. From the start I wish to discuss some important aspects about the social and political context we find ourselves in today. Considerations of our identity seem to be everywhere these days, in the national news, in the latest pop/rap video, in the very clothes that we choose to wear. The question of identity appears to cross a wide range of scales, from the most personal ('who' am I?), to the various groups we associate with (we know that we behave differently for different groups), to national affiliations and, indeed onto the circuits of an emerging 'global' world order. The truth is we live through multiple identities, identities that help us to negotiate with others within various social scenarios and across differing scales. When speaking of 'identity' we should, perhaps be quite specific – with respect to public or private, this or that affiliation. On the other hand, the very notion of 'identity' seems to slide across these various modalities and scales. We bring something of 'who we are' (or of who we imagine ourselves to be) in the most personal sense of the term, into our various group and public oriented associations. Identity appears to slide from the personal to the collective and back again, and we shall return to this important feature in due course.

On the public front, our politicians seem especially concerned to renew a sense of South African identity – that is a symbolization of our democratic belonging within the space of the nation. We may choose to be critical of certain assumptions that underlie, for instance, concepts such as Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' (Mbeki 1998), but I think we would be very foolish to dismiss what lies at the heart of the call to collective rediscovery. Since national governance today, must surely seek to mediate between the demands of a global economy and the more localised needs of a people, the formation of a national persona, of national identity or identities, must play a part in contributing to the well being of our existence together. The legitimacy of the will toward a common national/cultural identification is highlighted when we give consideration to the post-colonial, or if you prefer post-apartheid context of South African experience. Naturally, colonial rule and apartheid are not identical, yet there is much that coheres between them. We might say that our post-apartheid context is a rather particular species of post-colonial experience, and a consideration of post-coloniality seems appropriate if we are to locate the role that architecture might play in our present situation.

"Expansion is everything," Said Cecil Rhodes, and fell into despair, for every night he saw overhead "these stars ... these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could." He has discovered the moving principle of the new, the imperialist era (Arendt 1967: 124).

An unfortunate fact of our colonial heritage is that the right to cultural autonomy and self-determination of local peoples, was severely curtailed by the impositions of Western modernity. Modernisation – its technology, economy and incumbent set of cultural forms and values – emerge and develop in tandem with the very same historical process that seek to conquer and to exploit the peoples of the so called 'under-developed' world. The success of modernity was sponsored by the massive economic gains that were appropriated during the colonial era, whilst the formerly colonised have, in many cases, continued to struggle in the twilight of economic exclusion. In our own country, the imposition that was wrought during the colonial era, then perpetuated under apartheid, had the effect of suppressing, and often times erasing many aspect of local, indigenous culture. Post 1994, however, the democratic turn in South Africa polity understandably sparked a need to examine questions of identity, to re-discover a common African heritage and to re-construct our various senses of personal and collective belonging. And I feel it is also safe to say that the desire to discover the particularity of this condition must go beyond trite arguments, such as a binary logic, which narrows choice between modernisation or tradition. A sense of belonging, although linked to the past, is a formation which exist within the present and must adapt itself to aspiration of the future. Honoring the past does not necessitate the nostalgic return to some idealised origin, nor should it require an abandoning of modern freedoms.

Identity and subjectivity

In recent years we have seen a return to philosophy and social theory that raise questions of identity in relation to the social forms of modernity and post-modernity at large (Hall & Gay 1996; Rajchman 1995; Rutherford 1990). Couze Venn's *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity* (2000), for instance, provides a useful discussion of contemporary theories of the subject that are pertinent to questions of post-colonial identity. Venn makes the assertion that each era within human history is "... fundamentally about the institution of a particular form of subjectivity ..." (Venn 2000:14). Insightfully he links post-modernity to post-coloniality, because, in his view "... the 'post' marks a hiatus in the history of the modern, the index of a crisis as much as a point of transition towards an indeterminate transmodern future." (Ibid.) From this vantage, "... the

questioning of who we are in the present should encourage us not only to challenge the narrative of a hegemonic modernity and its foundational discourses, but to endeavor to transcend the limits that seem imposed on us: a paradoxical modern gesture.” (Ibid. 16)

Following Venn we may, broadly, distinguish between *universalised, modern* conceptions of the human subject and the more *heteronomous* and *embedded* conceptions of the subject that emerge as part of a forensic assessment of modernity – criticism of various kinds that may be aligned with the ‘post’ of post-modernity (Ibid. 38-43). And he illustrates the philosophical development and eventual crisis of the ‘unitary, rational, self-sufficient’ (Ibid. 39) assumptions of the subject. Venn writes:

the discourse of modernity transforms the idea of journey [i.e. Christian salvation] into the progress of reason ... Descartes proposes a method for this progress which already grants to the subject the autonomy of a self-sufficient being ... Kant, as we know ... redefines the purpose of the journey in terms of the coming to maturity of humanity as a whole ... Hegel ... historicizes the process by way of the working of the dialectic ... Marx changes everything and too little: he introduces the political at the heart of the system, but he keeps the Hegelian logic, and thus the totalising ambition ... [which ultimately] produces the imaginary we know as Stalinism ...

The history of the subject after Hegel is the history of crisis and triumph ... marked by the accomplishments of an imperialist modernity ... in transforming the whole world, materially and culturally ... The project of modernity and of Enlightenment imagined it could authorize a civilizing mission (Ibid. 39-40).

Venn weaves between the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-François Lyotard, admittedly diverse thinkers, yet whose concerns with questions of the subject nevertheless, help to unpack the historical couplet of universality and imperialism. The hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, in particular, seems especially relevant for dealing with post-colonial/post-apartheid questions of personal and collective identity.

In his discussion of ‘narrative identity’, Ricoeur makes a crucial distinction between two senses of the word identity – for which he uses the Latin word *Idem*, to designate identity in the sense of the self-same (what am I?), and *Ipse*, in the sense of self-hood (who am I?) (Wood 1991: 188-199). Ricoeur submits that his distinction is ontological, “I agree with Heidegger that the question of selfhood belongs to the kind of entity that he calls Dasein and which he characterises by the capacity to question itself as to its own way of being and thus relate itself to being *qua* being” (Ibid. 191). And, it is with the second sense of this word identity, *Ipse* or selfhood, that we are primarily concerned, when we raise questions as to personal or public identity. For Ricoeur, the question ‘who am I’, is one that requires a hermeneutic dialogue of the self with itself. The self, in order to know itself, must endeavor to interpret itself, to transfer the character of its imagined self back onto itself. And, the dialogue is one that requires external symbolisation, especially in the form of narratives,

the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly by the detour of ... cultural signs of all sorts which are articulated on the mediations ... [i.e.] the narratives of everyday life ... Narrative mediation underlies this remarkable characteristic of self-knowledge – that it is self-interpretation (Ibid. 198)

Identity is constituted through the stories we tell about ourselves. Stories – like life itself – reveal their hopes, promises and secrets through the unfolding of narrated time. And so, observes Ricoeur, it is primarily the property of an emplotment that portrays the passage of time. Narrative mediation allows for an open and dynamic unfolding of human persona – of characterisation –

through time. One might say that narrative identity is a continuing hermeneutic loop of self-interpretation. It is, if you will, a 'live' play where one actively partakes in the formation of the plot that constitutes the projected motion of the self, as a being that lives in time. We have here a notion of identity that respects the harmonies and dissonances of time.

narrative constructs the durable properties of a character, what one could call his narrative identity, by constructing the kind of dynamic identity found in the plot which creates the character's identity. So it is first in the plot that one looks for the mediation between permanence and change, before it can be carried over to the character ... The narrative identity of the character could only correspond to the discordant concordance of the story itself (Ibid. 195).

It is noteworthy that in *Time and Narrative* (1984), Ricoeur had distinguished between historical and fictional narratives. A significant feature of his later suggestion – as to a narrative identity – is the way it positions the narration-of-selfhood as a site upon which fictional and historical narratives cross, converge and ultimately combine – "... narrative identity ... was the sought-after site of this fusion between narrative [historical] and fiction (Wood 1991: 188)." This 'fusing' of fiction and of history means that identity flows between domains of the public and the private, the imagined and the social, as well as between time-scales of past, present and future. In this, Ricoeur's formulation helps us to see that the sense of 'who we are' is produced within an imaginative space of narrative interaction – a space formed between the self and that of others. Our varied senses of subjective and collective belonging are inter-twined, and crucially, remain open to a poetics of re-imagination. Indeed the aesthetic work of re-imagining, of re-identifying with ourselves and with others, is what we in present day South Africa so desperately require.

Artistic works such as architecture, feature in the narrated mediation of life. As Hénaff and Strong elsewhere maintain, "... forms of expression [such as architecture] lie at the core, as constituent elements, of the social bond, as the genesis of the symbolic order by which communities come into being: that 'us' whose identity is tied to a territory, a memory, a language, customs, symbolic figures" (Hénaff & Strong 2001: 25). Ricoeur's considerations are significant in this light, because the work that architectural design does is one that projects from an imaginative subjectivity – the imagination of the architect. Since subjectivity/identity is a narrative construct – part historical and part fictional – our contribution as architects need not be an overly rationalised one. We don't require formulas or prescriptive principles, the hasty assumptions of 'politically correct' protocols. Rather, we should try to discover the particular sense of who we are, what it means to live in the here and now, to be conscious of who it is that we may wish to become, to be open to projections of new identity/identities and to trust our deepest intuitions.

Having sketched some ideas concerning the politics of identity in present day South Africa, I now wish to ask how identity might be established through architecture. There are many ways to approach this fascinating question, but for the purpose of this paper I wish to open a discussion along three related lines of enquiry pertaining to *language*, *space* and *materiality*, namely: 1) democratic judgement and creative process; 2) public space, both political and architectural; 3) and lastly, tectonic materiality and cultural memory.

Democratic judgement and creative process

By the term 'design process', I take to mean the full range of interactions with ideas, representations, technical documents, and most importantly humans that make up the daily task of a working architect. This array of multi-dimensional tasks, which add together to form a working process,

is hardly unique to architecture. Architects are, however, educated to understand this process in a somewhat special way. One is trained to see the process of making as being an open ended one, an opportunity to transform contingency into purposeful action. One might even go so far as to say that this is what architecture is. Now it seems to me that this imaginative process is exactly what we need, if we are to address issues of social identity in design. The new South African architecture is an emerging one, it is still rather young. It grows from a confrontation with the truly contingent and particular circumstance of our time. For me this is very important, because an open engagement with the others and ourselves has bearing upon the way we conceive political democracy. Looking to traditions of political thought it is possible to roughly speaking, distinguish between institutional or super-structural accounts of polity, versus those that aim to understand the more operative and embedded nature of political conduct. With the former we would be concerned with the values, social orders and/or institutions that enable democracy – Jürgen Habermas (1984) is perhaps a paradigmatic case, but also various positions within the liberal/communitarian debate, arguably, belong here (Mulhall & Swift 1996). And its certainly not my intension to belittle the important contributions that may be gleaned from this body of thought. For the purpose of this paper, however, I am more interested to ask questions as to the way of ‘being’ of the political – and diverse thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-François Lyotard and Bruno Latour, among others, have in my view, done interesting work upon this terrain.

Arendt’s political philosophy is especially relevant to the question at hand, indeed her way of approaching political theory is refreshing. For Arendt, the operative life of a democratic polity is essentially performative rather than institutional in nature. As Parekh explains:

[u]nlike a state or a legal community, a political community cannot be created once and for all, and nor can its existence be guaranteed by creating a specific set of institutions. For her, representative institutions, free elections, free speech, free press, and so on are only the preconditions of politics and cannot by themselves create or sustain a political community [...] legal and political institutions stimulate but do not guarantee a political life [...] politics refers not to the state per se, but to a particular manner of constituting it and conducting its affairs (Parekh 1981: 140).

For democratic politics, in its operative sense, has to do with thought and with action, with participation and conversation, These ingredients, observes Arendt, presuppose a public space that allows for the flowering of public culture – what she describes as a ‘space of appearance’ where citizens can meet in the discussion of public concerns, and we shall return to the issue of space under our next point. As Parekh puts it, “... political life is the realm of action *par excellence*” (Ibid. 116), and “... action is both an expression and a vehicle of freedom ... freedom consists in interrupting the given and starting something new ...” (Ibid. 118).

A leading feature of Arendt’s thought is her recognition of human plurality. As she writes in her book *The Human Condition*, “[p]lurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is the same as anyone else who ever lived; lives, or will live” (Arendt 1998: 8). Hence, politics must trade in opinions, perspectives and views – more so than ‘truth’ – because to live is to fulfill the particularity of a human life, and society is enriched in equal measure by the plurality of a shared world.

With the birth of a human being a potentially new source of creativity makes its appearance in the world. By acting a man [/woman] activates the potentiality, redeems the promise inherent in his [/her] birth, and makes it an event of worldly significance” (Parekh 1981: 115).

Yet for Arendt, this abundant uniqueness and plurality of human life, also requires confirmation, in the response and tacit understanding that issues from others. Public Space allows for

forms of public expression, where the plurality of perspectives are “... de-privatized and de-individualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (Arendt 1998: 50). And, our sense of reality requires “the ‘confirmation’ and ‘tacit acknowledgement’ of others” (Parekh 1981: 88). It is in this sense that our “moral, philosophical, literary, aesthetic, political and other judgements” are intersubjectively derived (Ibid. 89).

Arendt argues that the kind of vital and free action constitutive of public life, requires an equally vital and free mode of human judgement and, surprisingly perhaps, she looks to Immanuel Kant’s third critique, his *Critique of Judgement* (1951), to elaborate on this question. It must be said, that deriving a politics from Kant’s third critique is to think Kant against Kant, because it is well known that Kant established his politics upon a theory of right, informed by moral judgements that are derived from his second critique, his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1949). Arendt’s political, counter-reading of Kant is novel and of far reaching consequence, for it opens the door to indeterminacy and the logics of a circumstantial pragmatics.

Kant’s third critique deals with aesthetic and teleological judgements, and it is the former – namely aesthetic imagination, indeed the Kantian notion of ‘reflexive’ judgement – with which Arendt is concerned. In her discussion of Kant’s imaginative or ‘reflexive’ judgement, from the third critique, Eva Schaper explains:

In [Kant’s first critique] the Critique of Pure Reason, to judge was to apply a concept or a rule to particulars. Now, rethinking this in the introduction to the third Critique, Kant wishes to call that kind of judgement ‘determinate’ judgement and to distinguish it from ‘reflexive’ judgement, where the particular is given and the rule or concept under which it falls has to be found or discovered ... aesthetic judgements are treated as reflexive judgements or judgements of reflexion (Guyer 1992: 369).

Arendt structures her highly particularised, positioned and embedded conception of political action under this principle of reflexive judgement, derived from the third critique – as opposed to Kant’s own politics derived from the determinate judgements of his second critique. And, it is noteworthy here, that Jean-François Lyotard has initiated a parallel motion, with his philosophical concern for a “politics of indeterminate judgment” (Readings 1991: 106) which also springs from Kant’s third critique, as elaborated by Lyotard in *Just Gaming* (1985) and *The Differend: Phrases in dispute* (1988).

There are two important aspects to Kant’s conception of reflexive judgement that must be highlighted here. First, we should note the imaginative and projective creativity that, according to Kant, is involved when one is required to judge a unique and particular instance, such as a work of art, or following Arendt, such as a political circumstance. In linking public matters with reflexive judgement, Arendt wishes to declare the ‘art’ of politics – that is, a public art of purposeful enactment, which must often times confront unique and uncertain circumstances. The second point is to note that reflexive judgement works to establish or to estimate a rule, that is a regulating principle which transcends mere personal perspective, one that is constitutive of a common sense. For Kant, this common sense is achieved by weighing up and judging between the respective merits of various possible judgements, to arrive at the one that would be most valid, or applicable for all. Reflexive judgement is a second-order judgement, a judgement among possible judgements. As Schaper clarifies, “[i]t is the combination of the subjective status with the universality and necessity claim that makes judgements of taste [these being reflexive judgements] what they are ... (Guyer 1992: 371).

Arendt's appropriation of this double move – an imagination receptive to a particularity, and the equally imaginative weighing up of the best common sense for dealing with it – is elegantly expressed by Hansen, when he writes:

For judgement [in the political sense] to be both assertive and persuasive ... certain conditions must be realised. It is these conditions which Arendt seeks to articulate in her use of the Kantian notion of the enlarged mentality, or the 'enlargement of the mind.' This enlargement is achieved by 'comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man.' Only in this way can our judgement possess the genuinely persuasive power that comes from participation in a common situation, a 'common sense' ... The faculty that allows us to put ourselves in the place of another is the imagination ...” (Hansen 1993: 210).

And we may add that imagining ones way into an enlarged mentality in the hopes of estimating a common sense is a challenging undertaking. Indeed, it is one that replicates the very risk of politics. Arendt does not contend that one's attempt at this will always work – for who can guarantee the fulfillment of freedom? She does believe, however, that a persistent 'enlargement of mind' is the better, the more hopeful and therefore the more reasonable path toward an inclusive and democratic polity. As Hansen puts it, “[a]ttempting the necessary frailty of the public realm means accepting the frailty of judgement, a frailty which, to use the words of Paul Ricoeur, is more powerful and secure than any metaphysical guarantee” (Ibid. 216).

Democracy envisaged as a fragile and open ended question, a question with which we must all be concerned, models a picture of the political that has some striking similarities to the kind of creative processes that are required when doing design. If we apply this Arendtian insight, regarding reflexive judgement, to design processes – and more specifically to the question of public architectural identity – then we are liberated to see the democratic potential that is always available within contingent realities. If we are following Arendt here, then we are freed from overly censoring concepts that all too often try to guarantee success in matters of public design – be they via prescriptions of style, cultural or expressive essentialism of various kinds, narrow rationalisms derived from ideal or sociological models as well as romantic arguments as to the genus of people and of nation.¹ Rather, the embedded opportunities for authentic public expression are to be found in the making of discrete choices, set in relation to the imaginative capacity to estimate appropriate action. A new South African identity in design, should therefore not in any sense, be reduced to debates over prescriptive models or 'correct' protocols. Here again, I wish to concur with Venn who aligns the post of post-coloniality with the post of post-modernity – a post-colonial architecture should be a truly creative, emancipated and inter-subjective type of design.

Having established the crucial role of imagination on the non-prescriptive and indeterminate side, we should add that this need not equate to an un-thoughtful, selfishly irresponsible or merely subjective form of freedom, because the necessity for an imaginative estimation of a common sense is paramount. I wish to argue, that in our present context, we need this kind of emancipated and responsible openness if we are to succeed in the formation of successful political action, and of course we must add in architecture here also. Architectural design, examined in accordance with these ideas would, I believe, align itself with a democratic and risky adventure into honest and robust conversation with others.

Public space

Another important way in which architecture can contribute to the building of public identity is through the framing of public space. We need, however, to distinguish between actual, or *physical*

space versus the communicative or *discursive spaces* that are so crucial for contemporary politics (Noble 2010). With the term *physical space* I am referring to the space that architecture inscribes. No doubt my reader is reading this paper whilst occupying a physical space or locale – perhaps it’s a home, a library or possibly an urban square. The architecture of this environment defines the limits of the space that my imagined reader is occupying, and it is in this sense that the actual space/place of the reader may be identified as an architectural space. But we may also refer to another kind of space, that is a *discursive space*, a space or opportunity for dialogue and discussion. A discursive space is not necessarily located at any fixed local, because as we know, it is a primary feature of our contemporary experience that communication and association are mediated through media – be it via printed media, broadcast media, cell phones, internet or email.² That said, contemporary political theory has tended to use the word ‘space’ to designate modes of participation in communication, because a communicative interaction is always ‘between’ – a relation between participants is required, as are the subject/object dualities of language, or if you prefer, of mediation through symbolisation. Space, in the sense of discursive or communicative space, perhaps implies a somewhat more metaphorical usage of the word ‘space’. In any-case, I think it is clear that architectural space and discursive space are not the same. Indeed, I believe we might say that discursive space and architectural space are ontologically distinct, even though there may be geographies and times wherein they co-inside. What I have termed discursive space may also be described as public political space, a notion which features widely in contemporary political theory of various persuasions – for instance in the work of Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, Iris-Marion Young, Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe, amongst others.

As already noted, Hannah Arendt describes the public political sphere as a ‘space of appearance’, where humans appear before each other, a space of togetherness in plurality. As Parekh explains, “... public space or space of appearance is the intangible ‘in-between’ or ‘interspace’ that exists between men [/women] formally assembled to talk about objects of common interest” (Parekh 1981: 92). Public space is performative and transitory in that it, “... comes into being when men [/women] formally meet to talk about public objects, and disappears when they disperse, do not discuss public objects or somehow abandon the formality of the meeting” (Ibid. 96). Marcel Hénaff and Tracy Strong in their introduction to *Public Space and Democracy* (2001) prefer to use the term ‘theatricality’ to specify what they deem to be a primary distinguishing characteristic of public space. They maintain, “[f]rom the beginning, public space was associated with theatre ... [public space] is theatrical, in that it is a place which is seen and shows oneself to others” (Hénaff & Strong 2001: 5). Debate within much contemporary political philosophy seeks to understand the nature, capacities and limits of discursive/public space. Various perspective as to the operative nature of public space are currently disputed, but many writers implicitly accept that democratic polity is implicated upon some concept of a discursive/public sphere, a space which must, notionally, be opened to all.

In our earlier consideration of Ricoeur, I introduced his idea of a narrative identity, one that weaves between historical and fictional narratives, between public and private realms. An important point to note, from this earlier discussion, is that we all enter the public realm with our cultural background and personal memories firmly in place, and for this very reason the subjectivity that positions our respective differences is itself an issue of public political significance.³ From these considerations I hope we can gain a somewhat expanded conception of public space, a space complexly plural, personal and collective all at once.

Numerous opportunities for inter-personal engagement are available within the processes and pragmatics of a design process. These many interactive moments, which inform the making

of architecture, adhere to its public character. Architectures' identity, however, must also be debated on a wider public stage. If the new South African architecture is to make a contribution to the formation of genuine public identity/identities, then we require the widest possible level of public interest and debate. Genuine public identity in design must evolve from the practices of a genuine public discourse. The question of a new South African architecture needs to be phrased as an open one, that is, a question which allows for the interests and views of all concerned. As practitioners, theorist, critics, politicians, artists, builders and members of the public at large, we must all position ourselves, we must argue our respective points of view, but at no time may any of us lay claim to the certainty of some pre-given truth. The 'reality' must be allowed to emerge from among us. These consideration are also important because they expand the number of questions we that can ask of architecture.

In his book *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* Lawrence Vale (1992) presents an important study of new government building in various developing countries around the world. Vale notes the relations that exist between the architectural design of space and its locality within the town. His point is that the siting of a public building tell us about its true democratic effect or otherwise. His historical studies demonstrate that there is often a contradiction between the formal/architectural design of public open space and its, sometimes, in-accessible urban character which tends to squeeze out public participation in favor of a distinctly separate, institutionalised and at times even authoritarian inscription of space. A building may do its bit to construct a public identity, and to build fine architectural public space, but what good is this if the public are excluded. The question here, is one that hinges upon the particular relation that exists between categories of the *political/discursive* and the *physical/architectural* aspects of open public space.

The Mpumalanga Legislature in Nelspruit, for instance makes a grand arch-like gesture, embracing a welcoming space at its front. Walkways curve around symbolically joining the many together (see figure 1). The Union building and Great Zimbabwe are cited by the architects as precedents in this regard (Noble 2011). A privileged space for gathering is appropriately provided in front of the Assembly, here located on the southern side of the building complex. Entrance to the square is well considered, as are the opportunities for seating and shade, devices which seek to ensure that a visitor's experience is an inviting one. But the legislature complex is re-moved from the town, and entrance to the complex is controlled on the distant northern side. The architects original intention was to supplement the controlled northern entrance with a more public oriented entrance which would open the legislature, and its art gallery, directly onto this public square. The doors to the legislature that allow for this, however, are closed to the public, with security cited as the primary cause. Yet the architects insist that the clients security concerns were designed for. As a result this well designed space has been distanced from the life of the town, and is hardly used. The design of this space may well provide a cogent architectural identity for the province of Mpumalanga, but the identity in question is tarnished by the fact that public access has been curtailed (Ibid.). This example demonstrates the complex relations that often occur between what I have called the architectural/physical and discursive/public aspects of space, and it appears that architecture, alone, is often powerless to ensure that space is indeed public, at least in the sense that Arendt requires of the term.



Figure 1
Public square in front of the Assembly, Mpumalanga Legislature in Nelspruit, by Meyer Pienaar, Tayob Schnepel, 1997 (photo: Jonathan Noble 2010).

Tectonic materiality and cultural memory

I now wish to consider a third and final suggestion as to how architecture may embody public identity, and I have left this till last for it is the most distinctively architectural of the three – hence we move onto the register of tectonic materiality and cultural memory.

Following Ricoeur, we have noted how narrative identity holds the semblance of discord and of concord, the dynamism of time, of past, present and future that are woven into the emplotment of a narrated life. In the early post-apartheid period, nevertheless, we find a certain gravitation that links identity with questions of remembrance and of heritage – the veneration of indigenous histories, mythologies, practices and material cultures. This concern with Africa’s past is, in part, related to nationalistic myths of origin. But, there is also a more ethically oriented project here, concerned with the recognition of formally subjugated narratives and traditions. The past, of course, is always appropriated from the perspective of the present, where precisely, present and future aspirations converge and cross-fertilise – such that a past is never merely a past, an observation which holds for the present and future alike. In addressing the issue of heritage, I am in no way suggesting that this is the only way to approach the question of architectural identity.

In his address at the launch of the Freedom Park in Pretoria, then president Thabo Mbeki cogently reminds that,

[i]n some instances, the colonists succeeded in obliterating the memory and identity of the local people. Hence, another illustrious writer from our continent, Ben Okri, in his book, “Astonishing

the Gods,” succinctly captures this tragedy: “He was born invisible. His mother was invisible too ... Their lives stretched back into the invisible centuries ... It was in books that he first learnt of his invisibility. He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn’t exist ... He traveled the seas, saying little, and when anyone asked him why he journeyed and what his destination was, he always gave two answers. One answer was for the ear of his questioner. The second answer was for his own heart. The first answer went like this: “I don’t know why I am traveling. I don’t know where I am going.” And the second answer went like this: “I am traveling to know why I am invisible. My quest is for the secret of visibility” (Mbeki 2002).

The issues of visibility, of recognition, of the veneration and vitality of African cultural traditions is a leading theme that informs the emerging public architectures of the post-apartheid period, which requires architectural depictions of the past (Noble 2011). The ideational abstraction of literary narratives – with respect to narrative identity – arguably allows for a seamless depiction where past and future flow upon the present. This is possible because narrative is both in time and a representation of time – narrative is both literal and imagined time. Architecture, however, when conceived as a representational medium, is not always so seamless with respect to the depiction of time – because architecture is largely static, outliving its own time. Yet what is required here is precisely a contemporary architecture that depicts, or that resonates with African motifs and themes that are gleaned from the past. And as we shall see, the identity of time, in an imaginative/architectural sense, may be mediated through materiality – rather than through literal time, as is the case with language/narrative. Hence we can link materiality to the notion of narrative as time.

In the present case, the relation of the *modern* with the *past* may also be stated as a relation of *hard* to *soft* – where the contemporary medium of concrete, glass and steel is set in relation to older aesthetic motifs derived from grass, mud, bone, egg shells and reeds. And, I content that this relation of hard to soft – as a mediation of present to past – has posed a unique challenges for contemporary South African design. In this respect, the work of German architectural theorist, Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) is illuminating. Indeed, Semper’s thought provides an insightful study of early manufacture and craft, which opens a helpful alternative to the scenographic approach of much uninspired post-modern design – where certain Africa themes are, for example, reduced to mere surface treatment.

Mallgrave reconstructs the two central theses that underpin Semper’s thought, “(1) there exist certain basic types of motives for art, sometimes clearly and distinctively seen, which are older than the existing social organizations in which they have been formally interpreted” (Mallgrave 1996: 284) – or to put this in contemporary terms, that leading artistic motifs and themes contain an archeology of traces, or a lineages of transformation that issue from the past. And, “(2) these types or motives are borrowed from the primeval technical arts, from the very earliest times ... [and that through time such] ... became agents for the transformation of architectural forms” (Ibid. 284) – and this, Semper’s second thesis, emphasises the underlying influence of early forms of manufacture and of craft.

It is well known that Semper defines the ‘four elements of architecture’ as the *hearth* which he associates with metal work and ceramics, the *roof* which he associates with carpentry, the *mound* (or floor) which he associates with water and masonry, and the *enclosure* which he associates with the weaving of mats and carpets (Semper 1989:102-103). Semper observes that early enclosures of space began with mats and carpets before being transformed into the surface articulation of walls. For Semper, the material substance of the wall – in most cases masonry – belongs to structure, and not enclosure as such, whilst the architectonics of enclosure, of drapery

and surface articulation, retain a memory of the tectonics of woven mats and carpets. As Semper explains:

... perhaps the oldest substitute [for carpets] was offered by the mason's art, the stucco covering or bitumen plaster ... [and] ... the panels of sandstone, granite, alabaster and marble that we find in widespread use in Assyria, Persia, Egypt, and even in Greece ... For a long time the character of the copy followed that of the prototype. The artists who created the painted and sculptured decorations on wood, stucco, fired clay, metal, or stone traditionally though not consciously imitated the colorful embroideries and trellis work of the age-old carpet walls (Ibid. 104).

I have argued, elsewhere, that the Semperian transformation of artistic motifs derived from one material – such as woven carpets – into the stylised formation of a new medium – such as stucco, or ceramic tiles – introduces a notion of a material metaphor, where one material is suggestive of another (Noble 2013). And in the present context we are concerned with material metaphors, of hard in relation to soft. Naturally, Semper's thesis is historical, his claim being that wall treatments replaced carpets, and the tectonic memory of the carpet that he describes may not have been intended. In applying Semper's ideas, however, we do of course render them self-conscious, in the sense of a design approach that may be applied.

To illustrate the notion of material metaphors, I wish to consider the South African Chancery in Addis Ababa, designed by Mphethi Morojele, of MMA Architects, and completed toward the end of 2008 (Morojele 2009). In interviews with the architect, Morojele explained that his design for the embassy required something of a symbolic handshake between Ethiopia and South Africa, and for which reason he had wanted to refer to long surviving cultural and tectonic traditions that are associated with each region (May & November 2013: Johannesburg). Evidence for this is shown in his lecture presentation of 2013 which assembles images to demonstrate how he had intended to make reference to the traditions and material cultures of Ethiopia and South Africa (Morojele 2013). Slide 13 (see figure 2 top) and 14 (see figure 2 bottom) of this presentation show design references derived from rock art, a rock hewn church from Lalibela, a fallen stela from Axum, the decorative metalwork of an Ethiopian Orthodox cross and a woven basket (Morojele 2013). In particular, the theme of woven textiles would prove to be a leading influence on this design. Early sketch explorations of textile like surfaces would later inform the large stainless steel sunscreens that protect portions of the eastern, northern and southern facades. Designed in collaboration with South African artist Usha Seejarim, these large screens achieve the sense of a liminal materiality, where the fine grain of the mesh plays between degrees of opacity and translucency, of presence and absence, through the reflecting and dissolving of steel into light (see figure 3). These beautiful screens achieve a remarkable sense of subtlety and of depth for the facade. They provide a metaphoric sense of woven textiles, of Ethiopian garments such as the veil and without reducing the former to mere scenographic images. A more explicit reference to South African heritage is also introduced by iconography derived from rock art, through the affixing of pop-rivets that Seejarim used to draw upon the screens. Her work with pop rivets creates the sense of an embellished textile or tapestry.

This building derives much of its expression from an insightful use of material metaphors, one that parallels relations of time (present/past) with materiality (hard/soft). And finally, in observing this, I do not mean to say that the architect consciously applied Semper's thought to his design, but rather to argue that Semper's theories are remarkable and illuminating in this context. And I want to suggest that material metaphors – of hard and soft – are a recurrent feature of post-apartheid designs.

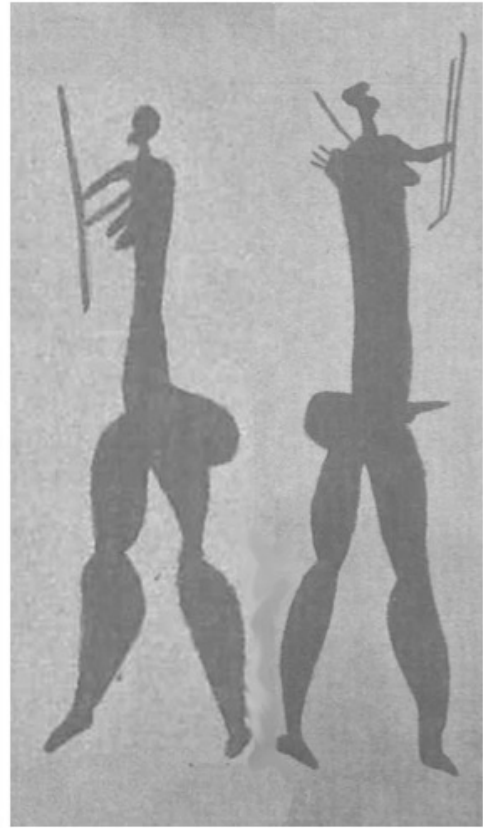


Figure 2
Material cultures of Ethiopia and South Africa, from 2013 lecture by Mphethi Morojele
(source: Morojele 2013: slide 13 & 14, courtesy MMA Architects).



Figure 3

Stainless steel sunscreen at the South African Chancery in Addis Ababa, by Usha Seejarim in conjunction with MMA Architects, 2008 (photo: Jonathan Noble 2013).

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored three related lines of inquiry which link architecture to questions of identity – subjective and public alike. The first inquiry (pertaining to imaginative processes in design) is perhaps the leading motion, for it introduces questions of discernment and of reflexive judgement, here positioned as a pre-condition for democratic polity – i.e. of *language*. The second point regarding public space, flows from the first, for democratic action should be supported by space, and should, in turn, secrete architectural space – i.e. of *space*. The last line of inquiry, into questions of tectonic transformation and the veneration of heritage, attempts to

translate themes derived from narrative identity to the domain of material culture, from time to materiality – i.e. of *materiality*. It is my hope that these interrelated themes – linguistic, spatial and material – may contribute to imagination, for history awaits a new and worthy black architecture as we glide into a transmodern future.

Notes

- ¹ In resting her case for the political upon an indeterminate form of human judgement, Arendt does not close the door to empirical evidence derived, for example, from economics, statistic or sociological study – all of which, naturally, may influence political judgement. Her point is that evidence pertaining to society, or economy, must pass through the space of human judgement in order that an interpretation of the same might become actionable. And since what we might call the ‘facticity’ of circumstance allows for a variety of response, the Kantian reflexive principle – of weighing up to find the better among a series of possible judgements – holds. The inverse of which is also to say that an economics and a sociology cannot directly be transformed into a thoughtful politics – and indeed direct attempts to do so, would be dubious and potentially totalitarian in character.
- ² Hence, for instance, Benedict Anderson’s related notion of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983).
- ³ It was observed, following Ricoeur, that subjectivity is never merely constituted within itself, but rather in relation to others. It is in this sense that the public and the private overlap, intertwine and cross-fertilise. Although no clear cut limit should be set between public and private spaces, I would argue that we nevertheless still require, for practical reasons, a concept of public discourse, or domain, which is orientated toward matters of public interest.

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