A SPATIAL INSURGENT AS DEVICE FOR URBAN COHESION
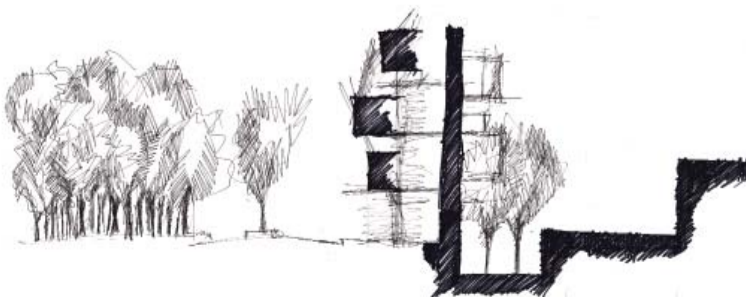
AN OPPORTUNISTIC PANACEA AGAINST THE MEGALOMANIA OF MODERNIST PRETORIA

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My Saturday Friends
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JCB en LJB
vir liefde en ondersteuning,
bemoediging en begrip
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vir JCB en LJB

ABSTRACT

Pretoria has a complex history; a contested social legacy and a rich physical context. It was severely modernised in the 1960s, destroying and discarding many of these narratives. The consequences of those decisions left us with a city devoid of a healthy street life; a city lacking comfortable public spaces; a city for buildings, not a city for people.

The city belongs to however has power, whether political or financial. It does not belong to the dweller. The city became a means to exert power. As hegemonies change its pendulum effect can be seen in the city. Building projects are used to strengthen the ideologies of each regime. It this battle of who owns the city the rich narrative of Pretoria is lost.

This project interrogates the site physically, historically and socially to get to the essence of what makes this place unique; to get to the basic elements that make it A place and not just ANY place. It also looks at theoretical approaches and precedents that give evidence of similar urban challenges and their appropriate responses. The essential site conditions are clearly demarcated and became the design drivers.

The design drivers are: The site in its physical and historical context; the existing programmes; as well as systems needed for a sustainable intervention.

Through a process of analysis and design the concept originated from the meeting of two conditions on site. The one condition is the built fabric and the other condition is the urban forest. The meeting of the two become the threshold not only between the two conditions but also between the inside and the outside of the new public square. The structure acts as a stoep into the city, a structure that is both a wall and an entrance.

This concept is taken through to the detail level. It aims to not only connect the urban and the built conditions but also the myriad of loosely scattered programmes in the vicinity. It intends to bring them together through the augmentation of the existing programmes into an identifiable, cohesive public space.

CONTENTS

"The architects, planners and businessmen are seized with dreams of order, and they have become fascinated with scale models and bird's-eye views. This is a vicarious way to deal with reality, and it is, unhappily, symptomatic of a design philosophy now dominant: buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be." ~ Jane Jacobs (Jacobs 2011)

1 CHAPTER

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INTRODUCTION

Figure 1.1 ~ Authoritarian design.psd

The modern city developed into a "physical object and a technical project"
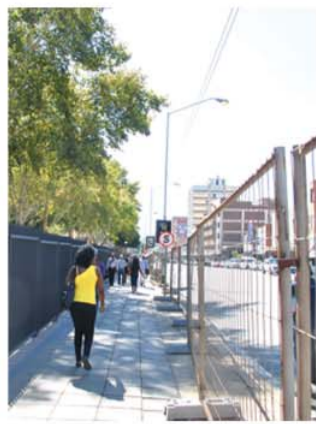
(Lehtovuori 2010: 114)

WHOSE CITY IS IT ANYWAY?

The modern city is a physically controlled space of order and sanitation, a space striving for pacifism and certainty. The traditional city, on the other hand, was physically "contingent" (Lehtovuori 2010:114). It was understood as an "ethical and political unit" (Lehtovuori, 2010:114). The conception of the traditional city was for the exact opposite reason, namely to negotiate conflict and tension (Harvey 2008). Cities have therefore become sterile. They are largely devoid of stimulation. The modern city has developed into a "physical object and a technical project" (Lehtovuori 2010: 114). The city today is a privately owned space with directed usage and limited interaction.

Consequently cities do not belong to the inhabitants anymore. Inhabitants lost their right to the city (Harvey 2008). The user of the city therefore does not have the right to manipulate the space that he lives in. To be able to manipulate and re-appropriate our environment is part of our human nature (Harvey 2008). It is therefore our "space of representation" (Lefebvre 1992) that is being limited and restricted. Today, public life has nothing to do with "being" (Heidegger 1962). It is a commercialised activity supported by a consumerist culture. We do not have truly public lives anymore.

Figure 1.2 ~ Existential outsideness.psd

The city dweller lost his voice and is effectively existentially left outside.

Figure 1.3 ~ Site photos.psd

PRETORIA SINCE 1960

During the 1960s Pretoria CBD developed into a modernist city – traditional architecture had to make way for the new vision the state had for a twentieth century modern city. Great inspiration was taken from the Brazil Built movement. Unfortunately like all modernist cities, Pretoria became a city focussed on sufficiency and universality. Zoning destroyed the inner city and vehicles ruined the street. Public life was pushed out. Private ownership isolated the citizen from the city.

Lilian Ngoyi Square and immediate environment is steeped in biased representations of previous hegemonies. Like a pendulum, the representations of history swings from one bias to another. In the power struggle of who owns the city, the city became an object to be manipulated from above. The city is not owned by the dweller but rather by capitalists with political or financial agendas. It disregards the embedded narrative and the dweller. In the process the city dweller lost his voice and is effectively existentially left outside[1]. (Relph 1976)

Pretoria inner city has a lack of cohesive public spaces. Historic contestation for space and recognition fragmented the urban experience into privately owned monumental or commercial spaces. Historic significance and physical memory is disregarded and forgotten. The successful narratives of public life are marginalised and unrecognised by the existing architecture.

[1] *"Existential outsideness—a sense of strangeness and alienation, such as that often felt by newcomers to a place or by people who, having been away from their birth place, return to feel strangers because the place is no longer what it was when they knew it earlier. "(Relph 1976)*

Figure 1.4 ~ Site of intervention.psd

URBAN INTENTION

Set on the forgotten site on the corner of Sisulu (Prinsloo) and Helen Joseph (Church) Streets the design aims to undermine the existing architectural megalomania of the modern "object" city of the 60s that not only killed the street, but severed the city dweller from a public life. By creating a device that exposes all the narratives of the site, unbiasedly (including history, formal and informal use, architecture and materiality) it aims to bridge the "object" city of the 60s with an "experience" city for the future.

The author postulates that in order to counter this phenomenon we have to mediate between the residual spaces left "outside" due to historic and economic contestations. We have to counter the lack of cohesion both spatially and programmatically. We have to acknowledge and allow a layering of the history without bias. We have to tell all the stories and not propagate only one. We have to tap into intimate traditional narratives that still exist in the shadows of Pretoria's brutal modernism and manifest them again.

We have to tell all the stories and not propagate only one.

ARCHITECTURAL ISSUE

The main architectural issues include the inaccessible and uninviting edge conditions on the site. . The lack of visibility of programmes on site and the unobtrusive entrances also need to be addressed.

The thresholds between public and semi-public spaces, semi-private and private spaces are crucial issues in the existing condition and needs to be clearly articulate.

Moreover, the lost spaces between buildings and programmes must be programmed and designed to form proper thresholds between buildings and programmes.

Overall the coherency of the site need be addressed through a larger vision of the area. This will inform the intervention with a guiding identity the site needs to attain.

Inaccessible edge conditions
Lack of thresholds
Unprogrammed lost spaces
Incoherent

ARCHITECTURAL INTENTION

The main intention of the intervention is to undermine the existing megalomania of the 1960s built legacy. It intends to do this by activating the edge conditions to create energetic street façades. A public device that functions as a traditional public square will act as an adhesive to connect the unconnected programmes surrounding the site. The intention is for the device to act as less of a building and programme in itself, but more as a device that augments the existing by bringing the existing conditions into a coherent whole. The new intervention uses edge conditions, threshold treatments and materiality to assemble the site into a coherent whole.

Subvert the existing megalomania
Activating edge conditions
Public square as adhesive
Augment the existing
Create coherent whole

"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." ~ Jane Jacobs (Jacobs 2011)

"The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights." ~ David Harvey (Harvey 2008)