Theoretical Discourse

Understanding the contemporary issue of institutional placelessness through theoretical discourse and literature.

Chapter 02

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Understanding the contemporary issue of institutional placelessness through theoretical discourse and literature.
The term place is used to describe an anthropological version of space (Jorge 1995:78), where space refers to the abstract and neutral scales of location, co-ordinates and dimensions. Place is a specific point within the void that is charged with significance and meaning (Jordaan 2015). Although this quality and somewhat elusive phenomenon is impossible to simplify, abstract or reduce into quantifiable parts (Norberg-Schulz 1976:414), multiple writers on the subject concur that the essence of place is a sense of enclosure created by the existence of an inside and an outside, separated by a boundary (Harries 1997; Jordaan 2015:1). Although this qualitative characteristic of place was initially perceived as exhibiting qualities that denote the possibility for people to meaningfully relate to and associate with the built environment, characteristic of architecture (Relph 1976:118), a condition that denies the possibility for people to meaningfully relate to and associate with their surroundings (Buchanan 2012:7), public institutional architecture in South Africa, both contemporary and historical, can often be characterised by endless corridors, homogenous rooms, anonymous materials and the pervasive cool glow of fluorescent lights. This condition of the institutional built environment, characteristic of architecture and institutional placelessness, was critically analysed in the spatial manifestations of institutional placelessness and determined that the essence of place is a sense of enclosure created by the existence of an inside and an outside, separated by a boundary (Harries 1997).

2.1 PLACE

In contrast to place, placelessness is a condition where spaces exist void of meaning and cultural values, capable of only facilitating mediocrity and anonymity (Relph 1976) which may provide all of the requirements for the physical body to flourish, but condemn the spirit to wither (Harries 1997). The species of placelessness that defines institutional placelessness and generates placeless institutional spaces has been well established in South Africa, an ongoing condition that needs to be rectified if architecture is to hold any kind of cultural relevance moving forward (Vermeulen 2009). The particular form of placelessness generated by this tradition is one of standardisation and homogeneity driven by utilitarian and economic concerns (Relph 1976:118), a condition that denies the possibility for people to meaningfully relate to and associate with their surroundings (Buchanan 2012:7). This relationship also made it an appropriate architectural expression for the many public institutions built during the Apartheid regime as the preferred but not the only style for governmental and administrative buildings thanks to its perceived independence and lack of overt references to the architectural traditions of Continental Europe and the British Isles. This form, public use and spatial experience. The species of placelessness that defines institutional placelessness and generates placeless institutional spaces has been well established in South Africa, an ongoing condition that needs to be rectified if architecture is to hold any kind of cultural relevance moving forward (Vermeulen 2009). The particular form of placelessness generated by this tradition is one of standardisation and homogeneity driven by utilitarian and economic concerns (Relph 1976:118), a condition that denies the possibility for people to meaningfully relate to and associate with their surroundings (Buchanan 2012:7). Public institutional architecture in South Africa, both contemporary and historical, can often be characterised by endless corridors, homogenous rooms, anonymous materials and the pervasive cool glow of fluorescent lights. This condition of the institutional built environment, characteristic of architecture and institutional placelessness, was critically analysed in the spatial manifestations of institutional placelessness and determined that the essence of place is a sense of enclosure created by the existence of an inside and an outside, separated by a boundary (Harries 1997).
2.3.1
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SOUTH AFRICA

ARCHITECT:
Jeremie Malan Architects and Interiors

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Built as a cultural icon for the city of Pretoria and imagined as the most technologically advanced library on the African continent, the monumental structure covers half a city block and provides enough space to accommodate up to 4000 visitors per day. The architecture of the new National Library exhibits several qualities that, according to Relph (1976:118-119), define it as placeless. Yet despite proliferating a condition of institutional placelessness, the building apparently still upholds the current values of the architectural discipline due to the fact that it was celebrated as a fine example of contemporary South African architecture with a PIA Award of Excellence in 2009.

Although it responds appropriately to the urban context and has a recognisable character from the exterior, once within, the memorability of the library quickly fades away. Due to a lack of spatial variation and recognisability, the library’s interiors are impossible to navigate without signage. Interior volumes are excessively large and cavernous (presumably in the attempt to evoke awe from the user), with scattered clusters of furniture floating within these great voids. The materials used to finish these volumes are stripped, like a veneer, and used to communicate the library’s ‘theme’ of technological advancement and sophistication. Concrete, polished stone tiles, glass, steel, stained timber and arbitrarily patterned carpets make up a ‘fruit salad’ of high-end interior materials which have all been finished to appear smooth or flat. African themed patterns and literary motifs have also been superficially applied to interior walls in an unsuccessful attempt to give the project a cultural relevance and functional legibility. The thinned nature of the National Library, along with its exaggerated size and generic architectural

quality characteristics it as an example of contemporary institutional placelessness. This, along with its quotidian detailing, standard fittings and predictable spaces, has denied the possibility for meaningful appropriation from the public and created an edifice that could just as easily be mistaken for a large conference centre or airport terminal.
Figure 2.8 - The manifestation of placelessness

Figure 2.9 - Fruit salad of generic materials and fittings

Figure 2.10 - Superficially applied ornamentation

Figure 2.11 - Decorative solar "protection"

Figure 2.12 - Impossibility to navigate without signage

Figure 2.13 - Furnishings float in 'ocean' of open space

Figure 2.14 - Exposed Northern Elevation

Figure 2.15 - Shaded Southern Elevation

Figure 2.16 - Meaninglessly patterned carpet
2.3.2
THE SANDTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

ARCHITECT:
GAPP Architects and Urban Designers

LOCATION OF PROJECT
Nelson Mandela Square, Sandton City,
Johannesburg, South Africa

DATE OF COMPLETION
1995

REASON FOR INCLUSION
A scheme that exhibits qualities of both place and placelessness

CRITICAL ANALYSIS
Defining one of the edges of the Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton City, the Sandton Public Library is a medium to large library that exemplifies the fact that not all the characteristics of place and placelessness are mutually exclusive and that a single institutional building can exhibit qualities of both simultaneously. Critical analysis reveals that the Sandton Public Library is primarily a place that exhibits qualities of placelessness despite it being initially perceived only as placeless. The characteristics that define it as a place are its recognisable and contextually responsive civic presence, the fact that its institutional interiors are separated from the commercial exterior by a clear boundary and that once within, the encompassing presence of books lends the place a functional legibility and communicates its civic role. By contrast, the placelessness of the building is defined by the fact that its civic presence is undermined by having the façade that fronts the square plastered with screens and billboards for advertising meaning that the architecture loses its recognisability and the institution's importance is eroded. Within the interior, although there are a variety of different library functions, there is a lack of spatial variation within and despite the library’s unique character, one's experience of the interior quickly becomes repetitive, predictable and homogeneous.
Figure 2.21 - Civic presence of the library

Figure 2.22 - Lack of internal spatial variation

Figure 2.23 - Civic presence undermined by being plastered with advertising

Figure 2.24 - Library’s role in the square ensemble

Figure 2.25 - Functional legibility from codices

Figure 2.26 - Tendency of users to gravitate away from large, impressive spaces

Figure 2.27 - Clear distinction between the inner realm of the library and the outer realm of the square

Figure 2.28 - Civic presence undermined by being plastered with advertising
2.3.3

**THE BROOKLYN COMMUNITY LIBRARY**

**ARCHITECT:**

Unknown - developed by Atterbury Properties

**LOCATION OF PROJECT:**
Design Square at Brooklyn Mall, Pretoria, South Africa

**DATE OF COMPLETION:**
2013

**REASON FOR INCLUSION:**
Exemplary of the most common type of institutional placelessness

**CRITICAL ANALYSIS:**

The Brooklyn community library is part of a sparse network of public libraries that serve Pretoria’s communities on a neighbourhood level. It occupies a shop next to Brooklyn Mall’s Design Square rather than its own building. Both a community library and of a similar size to the public library designed for this dissertation, the Brooklyn Community Library acts as an important example for critical analysis, not only for its similarities to this scheme but also because it is typical of the most common variety of institutional placelessness found in South Africa. Behind a nondescript shop-front just off the edge of the busy Design Square, the library acts as any other anonymous and ill frequented shop within the mall. Undermining the autonomy and civic importance of the library as an institution, it is subservient to the greater commercial space of the mall, lacking any kind of relationship to the nearby semi-public square as well as any kind of distinguishing architectural character that communicates its function. Instead, the library relies on signage designed and printed by its staff to announce itself and communicate its rules to the public. The interior of the library shares the exterior’s lack of character and defining features. Uncompromisingly generic and economically conscious, the library occupies a single room enclosed by smooth mint green walls, standard acoustic ceiling tiles, fluorescent lights and a carpeted floor, shelving and other furnishings are unremarkable and inconsequential to the architecture of the library. If removed, the space could just as easily have been an office floor or dance studio. In addition to the bleakness of the space, all seating is clustered next to the librarian’s desk where surveillance is possible and quietness is enforced, thus ensuring that little meaningful human interaction can occur within the library and any possibility for memorability or appropriation has been erased.

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**Figure 2.28** - Brooklyn Library locality plan

**Figure 2.29** - Unremarkable and predictable interior experience

**Figure 2.30** - Civic presence of the library

**Figure 2.31** - Typical interior condition

**Figure 2.32** - Rules communicated by signage
Brooklyn Community Library

Standard carpet tiles
Shelving

inconsequential
to structure

Standard ven-
tilation unit

Standard ceiling tiles

Attempt at human touch

Figure 2.34 - Uncompromisingly utilitarian

Figure 2.35 - Library as an institution is subservient to the mall

Figure 2.33 - The manifestation of placelessness

Figure 2.39 - Generic architectural expression means that function is communicated through signage rather than architecture

Figure 2.38 - Endlessly repeating elements

Figure 2.37 - Impossibility for social immersion

Figure 2.36 - Lack of memorability of the library

Theoretical Discourse
2.4 - CREATING PLACE

Contemporary philosophical discourse surrounding the topic of place stresses its necessity and importance (Relph 1976). The significance of place is also understood by many in relation to the architectural discipline, who describe the creation of place as the fundamental task of architecture (Jordaan 2015), and it is from this call that this study will investigate the creation of architectural place as a means of addressing the issue of institutional placelessness.

2.4.1 - PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD

According to Leach (2005:80), phenomenology is the study of phenomena through the lens of human experience, as well as the interpretation of phenomena as a means of understanding their ontological significance. Of the various types of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology of the Heideggerian school of thought is the one most intimately linked to the architectural discipline and has been argued to be an effective methodology for the creation of architectural place (Jordaan 2015), and will therefore be used for this study. As a methodology, it relies on the designer’s existing topostic knowledge and memory of existing places in conjunction with a hermeneutic understanding of places that can be used to inform the creation of new architectural places.

2.4.2 - THE TRIAD

In Constructing Place, Jordaan (2015) provides a comprehensive understanding of the nature of place, gleaned from a synthesis of the ideas of seminal phenomenologists Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in order to effectively develop a framework for the architectural creation of place. This framework takes the form of a triad structure where the notion of place is broken up into three interrelated dimensions, each containing multiple themes to be considered. The three dimensions that structure the framework are not hierarchical under the material dimension of place, the lived dimension of place and the mental dimension of place. The material dimension refers to the physical things, materials and joints that define a sense of place as well as the intentions behind their expression. The lived dimension refers to the reciprocity between the material and the lived realms where rituals and bodily actions define the sense of place. The mental dimension refers to how the perception of spaces through the senses, our imagination and our memories also informs our experience of place (Jordaan 2015:199) that the triad be tested as a system by architecture students and practitioners, this framework will be critically employed as a means of structuring and informing the place-making processes of this study.