

The provocation exhibition asked the question: “What if history is not valuable?” Is the disregard for heritage by fault of the history? If you have never stepped into a preserved Modernist interior, does that indicate that the said typology was/is worthless?

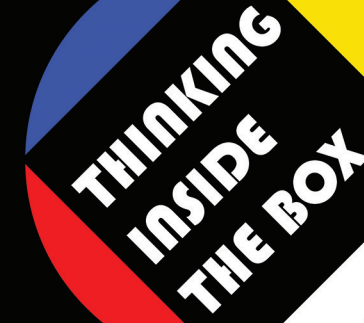
But what if these contested heritage interiors are not being devalued because of their nature, but because of ours? We are consumers, and buildings are consumer items. We are intrigued by aesthetic packaging, but we utilise the contents. Similarly, façade architecture attracts the masses, but interiors are the wombs in which we live.

The project urged the viewer to think inside the box and allow the insides to emerge wonderfully. Unfortunately, interaction with the item was minimal. Intrigue and appreciation for the packaging (Figure 22), though, were plenty. Alas, the item was found broken and the contents spilt at the culmination of the exhibition.

This might be seen as a failed attempt. A provocation aimed at stimulating interaction and appreciation beyond face value, failed to do just that.

However, as an experiment to prove the societal issue that needs to be addressed, the project succeeded. The initial question of whether history is not valuable if not regarded by society, was answered. Heritage interiors are not being devalued because of a lack of value, but because of our own detached ignorance. The item did indeed harbour surprisingly pleasant, interactive contents, but appreciation halted at the packaging, for most. The few that did interact fully, delighted in the sense of agency and surprise.

Even though the major project diverted from the “consumerist” accusation, the proven disregard for interior contents established a strong foundation upon which to build the design response.



**THINKING
INSIDE
THE BOX**

DIRECTIONS FOR USE:

1. Turn base horizontal & slide into bottom of box
2. Witness forms & colours emerge on top
3. Place box upright
4. Answer question
5. If answer “Yes” take one stick from upright box & place in bin
7. Place box flat horizontally
8. Remove base from box
9. Place base upright next to box

Use both hands at all times **CAUTION:**

Figure 22: Packaging design for the mini project item (Author, 2023).

Process, exploration and findings

The site analysis commenced in the research study on Modernist Afrikaans Protestant church interiors. The textual study considered various elements of multiple churches, including Burgerspark. Considerations included, amongst others, liturgical layout, alterations, materiality, furnishings, symbolism, and lighting. These contributed to forming a comprehensive value statement for the site (Appendix A). The value statement served as an important departure point for the design exploration.

Initially, as this is a sensitive heritage project, focus was placed on tangible heritage elements and the articulation thereof with proposed structures. Considerations of broader heritage and contextual issues as well as user needs were lacking. Furthermore, initially, the wrong existing elements were selected to draw from. An overabundance of existing informants derailed focus from the inherent intention: to generate an approach that mediates between expert and user value of Modernist buildings in the CBD. This resulted in ungrounded and disjointed initial explorations.

Emphasizing the spiritual experience as communal language led to identifying the Leo Theron dalle de verre windows as most valuable physical heritage element. The resultant design stemming from that, curated a more immersive journey for the various user archetypes. The design manifests the original value statement and theoretical intentions.

The abundance of informants, spaces and proposed programmes resulted in lack of clarity through various milestone crits. Refinement and packaging of ideas throughout the process allowed for a clearer vision in design decision-making.

Contribution to the field

The author strived to narrow the knowledge gap that exists in Modernist interior heritage conservation. As a relatively young heritage class, Modernist buildings and the conservation thereof are still being explored. This project aimed to serve as a precedent in aligning expert value of Modernist architecture with the general public disregard for them by transforming the structure into a vessel for community building.

Similarly, interior architecture as a relatively young profession is still exploring its relationship to heritage practice. This project contributes to the discourse as a rare instance of the implementation of theoretical musings.

This design can serve as precedent for private sector heritage developments in the inner city that can catalyse large-scale, precinct-wide regeneration of the CBD urban landscape. Pretoria showcases that private investment often precedes (or provokes) public interventions (Clarke, 2011:881). The project realises the development potential of the historical feature.

Through all these contributions, the author acknowledges that this is not the definitive, indefinite solution. Humility in heritage practice is imperative. Although the current solution is sound and contributing presently, it may not be in a few years. The architect stands humble before the original designers and current and future users.

Conclusion and project reflection

Due to the desktop nature of the site analysis, initial design proposals were based on the tangible existing elements. A more on-site approach with interviews and user interactions would have shortened the process to get to user-focused solutions.

The result is a heritage-sensitive community hub that translates the theoretical framework into an implementable design. It achieves the initial intention of highlighting the value of the heritage asset to experts and users alike, thus ensuring its survival.