ARCHITECTURE - A PHYSICAL EXPRESSION OF VALUES AND ASPIRATIONS OF SOCIETY?

by

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UIA 2014 Conference, "Architecture Otherwhere", Durban

6 August 2014

Introduction

In 2011 Jonathan Noble perceptively wrote,

> "Due to the destructive legacy of colonial and apartheid rule, the terms of reference for a new public architecture are far from clear. This circumstance, although tied to a bleak history, might also be seen as an important opportunity because it invites all South Africans to ask fundamental questions of their personal and collective belonging. In the absence of clear public or private grammars, recent public designs have begun to experiment with new forms of political imagination".[1]

The issues he raises in his book are very relevant for both the theme of this Congress and this session: where do we want to be as South African architects in 10, 20 or 30 years time, and what values do we need to get us there?

I find myself in a fairly unique position in that I was one of the few Africans to qualify and practice as an architect during the apartheid years in South Africa, and I am still actively engaged in issues confronting the profession. In this sense, I straddle the divide alluded to by Noble between the old era and the new.

I have chosen not to deliver an academic paper. Instead I am going to explore the topic by taking you on a personal journey – an odyssey, if you will – from where I began to where I am now. As I take you along on this personal journey I will highlight here and there the issue of values and, at the end, indicate how I think it relates to the theme of the Congress. Whilst the issues I raise have particular relevance, I trust that they may also be appropriate to other societies in transition.

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[1] J. Noble, *African Identity in Post-apartheid Public Architecture: White Skin, Black Masks* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 1.

It is particularly apt that we are holding this 25th UIA Congress in South Africa in the year we are celebrating 20 years of democracy and taking stock of the road we have travelled. In presenting my paper, I hope to stimulate debate and challenge Congress to help us as South Africans find answers for some of the challenges facing us.

The Journey

As a child I grew up in an environment that was pretty confusing: a society divided along racial lines which made me feel comfortable with my people, my culture my traditions and yet aspire to want to know how it feels to be in a different skin colour or another cultural group.

I grew up in a society also divided along class and economic lines which caused me not to be sure of whether to be content with what my parents could afford, or to aspire to enjoy the materialistic pleasures other people on the other side of the road were enjoying.

- A bedroom of my own in my father's house (may have been pretty boring at night as I had grown accustomed to sharing my space with siblings and cousins sharing stories and our daily experiences)
- A ride in a car (which could have increased air pollution and denied us of daily physical exercise)

I grew up in an environment which made me to believe that there was synergy of values embedded in both African and Christian religious beliefs, and that these were deeply rooted in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, which at its heart teaches that *umntu ngumntu ngabantu* (i.e. a person is a person by virtue of his or her relationship with others). The concept of *Ubuntu* encompasses issues of respect, tolerance, consultation, inclusivity and humanness. This is a fundamental African value that is again receiving attention in South Africa as we grapple with issues of national identity and social cohesion. But at that time, more often than not, I found that my community and I were highly unwelcome to the community on the other side of the road. This was even more confusing to me as a child, as I thought that my mother as a "girl" (domestic worker) and my father as a "garden boy" were loved by the people on the other side of the road, as they each dedicated most their individual times labouring on the other side of the road, compromising our bonding time as their children, of course for our survival.

As a child I had somehow accepted attending school in a small church building in the "location" as being a norm. This included having two different classes or grades being taught by two different teachers at the same time, under the same roof, although confusing this was somewhat acceptable to me as a child and I thought that this was a norm; having to move from one church building to the next, every year or every two years, as one was proceeding through primary school education- to me as a child, this appeared to be a

normal progression, although I kind of marvelled seeing big school buildings on the other side of the road, and wished that I could have been born and raised by the family from the other side of the road, but I had accepted that it was a wish not made for me and for my people. (At face value and by default, one may argue that in space economic terms, the system of not providing dedicated school buildings was ensuring that church buildings in the townships were utilised to the maximum. This argument would stand if the church buildings which we utilised, were properly designed to perform a multiplicity of activities. The unfortunate reality in this case is that the political system at the time, did not fundamentally consider it necessary to educate black children, as they were meant to be sources of cheap labour, servicing the owners of apartheid production machinery.)

I grew up battling to make sense of all these confusing messages, which were constantly revealing themselves to me as a child. To us as growing children in the mid-sixties, a horse or donkey drawn cart was an implied symbol of illiteracy and poverty, and yet we would occasionally watch from a distance "rich families" from the other side of the road riding on horseback, enjoying festivities such as horse-jumping shows, or having the newlyweds being chauffeured around on horse drawn cart. I did not understand how this could be cherished by anyone, when we were aspiring to move away from anything that resembled corridors of poverty. As a child, a trip from "the location to town" was always an enjoyable and yet a frightening experience: enjoyable because it was where our parents were able to buy us food, clothes and sometimes treats; frightening in that we grew up knowing that the "town" was out of bounds for us guys from the location.

So, since my earliest memories and from the deepest part of my being, I have understood cities and towns, space and form, as a device of the powerful over the powerless. From that time it was tangible to me that the space and form of the towns and villages that framed our lives were a reflection of a value system of the powerful white elite, an elite that had constructed space and form to physically demonstrate the extent to which they saw only limited value, in the lives of my family, myself and millions of other black families like mine.

My teenage years brought about awareness of my immediate surroundings and incidentally triggered a number of questions in my mind, about life in general, and the living conditions of the majority of South African society. As a teenager I became aware of the winds of political change which were sweeping across the continent of Africa - with a number of African countries gaining freedom from bondage of their respective former colonial masters. I began to marvel at the teachings of the Black Consciousness Movement of the mid-seventies, which the late Steven Bantu Biko was championing very vigorously. These were premised on values of self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-admiration of one's culture and ideals. *(Picture of Steve Biko)*. This philosophy was encapsulated in Biko's statement that, "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the

oppressed."[2] This has resonance for us even today. *(Aerial Map of Whittlesea and plans and photographs of Mhlotshana)*

I was in high school, and for a change, being in "definable school building", although with very rudimentary facilities like a science laboratory and a poorly stocked library with a couple of novels and two sets of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I became aware of the intrinsic and fundamental values of the Freedom Charter that it had systematically and consciously being trampled upon. The document was banned and even being overheard talking about it could lead to prosecution. Amongst the persuasive calls was,

> **The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!**
>
> The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace; Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit;

and,

> **There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!**
>
> All people shall have the right to live where they choose, be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security; Slums shall be demolished, and new suburbs built where all have transport, roads, lighting, playing fields, creches and social centres; The aged, the orphans, the disabled and the sick shall be cared for by the state; Rest, leisure and recreation shall be the right of all: Fenced locations and ghettoes shall be abolished, and laws which break up families shall be repealed."[3]

These were the times when there was no formal career guidance in township schools. This resulted in immense potential technical talent not being unearthed and thus being lost forever. Having said all the above, as a teenager, I had this fascinating love of art, drawing and sketching. Almost subconsciously, whenever I had an opportunity I would sketch buildings I had seen, and even go to the extent of sketching "imaginary towns". Unfortunately there was no-one to notice and nurture this brewing natural architectural talent. Unfortunately, no-one saw value in keeping the record of this narrative, as the most pressing needs to those who were close to me, were the immediate survival needs. But my mind still holds this record. My mind is still continuously imagining the picture of the ideal, future South Africa painted by the Freedom Charter. My mind still values this picture beyond any other. My mind, even now, is still busy painting this picture, sketching the towns, the villages, the schools, the houses and the hospitals of the South Africa imagined by the Freedom Charter. Because, the kind of freedom I allowed myself to imagine in the seventies and the eighties, has not yet come to pass and the kind of cities and towns I allowed myself to imagine in the seventies and the eighties, has not yet come to pass.

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[2] S. Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 92.

[3] Freedom Charter, adopted 26 June 1955, ANC Website, http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=72 (site accessed 25 July 2014).

Three years after the completion of matric, and by sheer coincidence, I found myself in the corridors of the University of Cape Town, *(Map of Cape Town; View of UCT)*. Now, the guy from the other side of the road found himself having to compete against all odds, with his new peers, at this prestigious place, whilst being completely unprepared, with no formal exposure to art, architecture or any related careers, but equipped only with, courage, faith and determination to be an architect one day.

The first two weeks at UCT could almost be equalled to "my second initiation"-. My courage and confidence were almost completely stripped away. The challenges were daunting and included having to grapple with "two second languages" simultaneously- English as a medium of instruction, on one side, and "Architecture Speak" on the other side.

The teaching of architecture was based on the "***generally understood and accepted norms and standards***". I had to quickly adjust my reference points so as to be on par with the thinking and understanding of my other peers. I quickly discovered a fundamental clash of cultural values when it came to basic architectural points of references:

- Although North orientation of buildings eventually made a qualitative sense, at first this *"accepted norm"* never made sense to me. In my culture and rural tradition background, dwellings were oriented East, the implied reason being *"the hope which sunrise brings to a new day"*

- In my culture land was not a re-saleable commodity, but for everyone to utilize. There I was, having to quickly learn that land is re-saleable, therefore a commercially viable commodity to capitalise on, of course if you have the means to do so.

- In my background man spoke of their "homestead" (Imizi) which had ideal spatial arrangement for each family, now I had to refocus and think about a single unit called "a house" for each family.

Historical references were mainly to ancient civilizations of Asia, Europe and America. It is here that I learnt about Renaissance, Baroque, Gothic, Modern and Post-Modern movements of architecture.

Design, Theory of Architecture and building technology were the main components of the studio work, particularly in the first three years of study. It is here that I learnt about architectural theories of Vitruvius, Palladio, Le Corbusier, Louis Khan, Walter Groupius, etc. The common denominator of all these "star architects", being that they were all trendsetters of different architectural theories. It is here that one began to appreciate architectural space making and crafting of buildings. It is here that one got the exposure to appreciate and value history and architectural heritage, but the questions which kept popping out of my mind (even if I half-suppressed them) were:

- Whose architectural history do I need to understand?

- Whose heritage should I aspire to embrace and preserve?

In my earlier years of study there was very little or no reference at all, towards Africa's ancient art, history and heritage, other than the scanty reference to the pyramids of Egypt, and Great Zimbabwe. It was only in the later years of my career that I became aware of the great heritage Africa has, in the City of Timbuktu in Mali, and (even closer to home) The Cradle of Humankind.*(pictures of these word heritage sites)*

So, out of this education came the inference, the unspoken rule, that we are to value the "other". That what we build here must draw its references from what has happened elsewhere.

- *That the thinking that has happened elsewhere is somehow of greater value than the thinking that I grew up with.*

- *That the thinking of the place that gave me life, and gave life to my ancestors for a thousand years before, is of lesser value to that which was crafted elsewhere.*

The latter years of my studies in the mid 80's, convinced me that architecture ought to prepare one to deal with a broad range of human spatial needs, and that every architect ought to be willing to maintain the balance between socio-cultural, economic and technological values. I became exposed to the works of Ebenezer Howard's "Garden City" which ended up being a precursor to my final project for Bachelor of Architecture degree.

- How this notion was presented as a solution to British society in transition, at the dawn of the Industrial revolution.

- How it was exported to South Africa as the colony of Britain, resulting in emergence of the Cape Town suburb of Pinelands, and

- How the same model, was badly skewed by South African legislation of the time, resulting in a completely different architectural product of Langa township, which was to become a model for development of South African townships. *(Aerial view of Pinelands and Langa Township)*

In a sense, the values with which I had been grappling found expression in this project. The study of this work was a conscious decision on my part, as the winds of change in South Africa were blowing very strongly at that time, and some of us knew that sooner or later we would be sitting with a responsibility of having to stitch together the divided South African cities, so as to transform them into homogenous, humane and hopefully equitable environments.

Some of us chose the reality of not becoming the "star architects" of the future who would be traversing the length and breadth of world, moving from one international conference to the next, showcasing their "world acclaimed architectural masterpieces".

Some of us knew that sooner or later our society would be in transition, and would need architects humble enough, to get their hands dirty and build the kinds of practices that deal with projects addressing day-to-day human needs such as:

- housing and urbanism,
- education, health, *(UFH)(Gonubie High School) (Mdantsane Library)(Frontier Hospital)*
- poverty alleviation, *(EPWP PMT work)*
- provision of social infrastructure,
- projects which would directly contribute towards equitable transformation of our built space
- contributing towards development of built environment policies, geared towards our society in transition. *(Design guidelines for EC School building Program)*

But even today there are many unresolved issues. The questions which some of us continue to grapple with, in this development phase of our transition are:

- What principles need to govern architecture, evolving from, and intended for, a society in transition?
- What value systems ought to influence research and teaching of this emerging architecture?
- What value systems need to be employed in the practice of architecture, for a society in transition?
- If we, as a community of architects, attach value to a 1970's shopping centre in Cape Town, heaping it with praise and awards, of what meaning is it in the face of a commercial community that values it so little that it prefers rather to see it demolished?
- If we, as a community of architects, attach value to a democratic era museum in Port Elizabeth, by heaping it with praise and awards, of what meaning is it in the face of a community not valuing it enough to allow it to keep its doors open to the public?
- What does one need to do in order to maintain a happy balance between what is assumed to be "logically correct architectural intervention" versus the aspirations of the groupings from the less privileged sector of the society?
- Which appropriate reference points ought to be used, to locate and anchor one's architecture, in this ever-changing global environment, and in these biophysical and economic shifts?

Responding to the above raises a host of inter-related questions:

- Would answers be found, if our architectural schools should find themselves incorporated within faculties of social sciences and humanities?
- Would solutions be found if our architectural schools introduced into their curricula, studies in housing and urban related needs and challenges?
(and let me not be unclear on my view in this regard: It is not good enough that we grow architects in the model of engineers or of fine artists. We can only locate ourselves among the social disciplines with their human focus, because an Architecture that does not have at its core a desire to improve the social condition, the living conditions of ordinary people, has no business standing sturdy in the gale or being displayed on the walls of fine galleries of the world)
- Should the re-emergence of rigorous contextual analysis for both academic studio and real projects be highly promoted when project briefs are appraised?
- Would we find answers to our challenges, if we were to ensure maximum utilisation of available data as part of project briefs for academic and for real projects?
- Is the promotion of architecture, which responds to cultural symbolism and equitable technology the answer we are looking for?
- Will rational design approach and absolute compliance with "green" architectural principles, give answers to our challenges?
- Is the current teaching and practice of architecture enabling a physical reflection of values and aspirations of a society in transition? If not, what do we need to do, to ensure that we create architecture that is in tandem with societal values and aspirations of tomorrow? You be the judge!

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have come to appreciate architects and architecture that aspire to the following values and ideals:
- Architecture that avoids promotion of power and dominance by any grouping over the other, but that seeks to be inclusionary and humane. *(Crossways Farm Village near JeffreysBay,Dr Chris Moulder's project)*

- Architecture that respects, embraces socio-political, religious and cultural diversities of its society, without being patronising in doing so. *(KSDT Monument)(Emlotheni Monument)*

- Architecture that embraces emergency situations and promote empowering methods, to get society out of survival mode to sustainable standard of living.

- Architecture that denounces excessive consumerism in support of responsible utilization of resources, which are currently being depleted at an alarming rate. *(UFH New Teaching and Library projects)*

- Architecture, by Architects who are uncompromising. Architects who will not accept a brief that does not value, above all other factors, lives of the ordinary people who will use the buildings that result from their efforts.

As we South Africans celebrate our 20th year of democracy it is appropriate that we take stock and ask ourselves searching questions about our society and our profession. We are not alone as architects in contemplating these issues. Societal challenges like poverty, unemployment, inequality, high crime rate, the apparent absence of commonly accepted values and norms of behaviour, the lack of social cohesion and an incomplete national identity are issues exercising the minds of many people.

Standing as we do on the threshold of our third decade of democracy, it is important that as a profession in South Africa we deliberate on what kind of society we need to create for our children and our children's children . We need to invite the world architectural fraternity, to help us define what part architecture can play, in creating this future. It is my belief that the future we imagine for our society should be closely linked to the issues of identity, which are in turn linked to values.

Thank You

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