

THE PAUL SMITH SHOP, JOBURG. CULTURE OF DISPLAY, CULTURE OF CONCEALMENT

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Fear and Clothing in Johannesburg: Sarah Calburn takes on the city's addiction to the dislocated dream world of ultra capitalism, the mall, and prescribes an exclusive, excluding, floating, opaque pink glass box

I see one of my more crucial roles as an architect as that of engagement with the city: I consider the attempt to identify, to play with, to extrapolate concepts built around conditions I see operating in this city as central to my occupation. Paul Smith is the story of one such attempt.

Joburg seems beset by 'mall culture'. I find this most odd in a city with the most livable climate in the world: we are blessed with clear blue skies most days of the year, we have many leafy avenues and pavements and parks, and we are not subject to draconian Australian-variety parking regulations ... yet. We are generally free to park anywhere, eat outside in

the sunshine, wander from shop to gallery to office to shop to restaurant In short, we are theoretically free to conduct a street and park life. We have the ever-present option of enacting and creating a vibrant urban terrain.

Instead, and in the face of the perceived threat of the 'public' - often, it seems to me, conflated in the most paranoid manner with 'crime' - most shops have retreated into the quasi-public 'safe zones' of homogeneous blind box malls. And most citizens seem content to wander these endless maze-like circuits, confounded by artificial light, blinded by decoration and highly coloured signage, bewildered by the appearance of choice ...

Inside the mall, you have 'everything under one roof', and no urban poor to confront. Your status as 'citizen' is reduced to one of 'shopper'. Condemned to the franchise, the brain is bulletted to quick shopping death. In the most optimistic view, that frantic eye is glazed and anaesthetised by the comfort of the already known, the recognisable All roads lead to Pick 'n' Pay, to Shoprite, to Mr. Price. There is no danger to confront, nothing new to explore, no unexpected discovery to make, except the delayed toll on your credit card.

Your status as 'citizen' is reduced to one of 'shopper'

You have lost your rights as a *flâneur* - that foot soldier, that wanderer, that poet, that pleasure-seeker and pavement-philosopher who negotiates at will and at risk the complexities, the vagaries, the filth and the joys of the nefarious, multiplicitous and unpredictable urban jungle. In the mall and on its peripheries, the eroticism and enchantment and un-



Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst.
Photo: Adriaan Louw

predictability of public life, as Achille Mbembe has put it, has gone missing. Presumed dead.

As for those actively excluded from the mall, the extent of what constitutes an urban domain is reduced to narrow pavements, traffic islands and the parking lot. Here you have every possibility of being arrested for "loitering". Loitering is not allowed in this "world-class city", I discovered the other day. There is, amazingly enough, a law against loitering that requires active enforcement. Apartheid has morphed seamlessly into a ruthless private/public divide.

Joburg has stated its aim to project itself as a 'world-class African city'. What is a 'world-class city', I would ask? Is it a 'cultural destination' - as cities appear to market themselves nowadays - and if so, what exactly does Joburg have to offer, cultur-



Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst.
Photo: Adriaan Louw

ally speaking? Is it African? Is it a city? And what is its destination value? What *are* its destinations, for a visitor?

A multiple choice exercise ensues: Which of the following might constitute the term ‘destination’?

- a. A continually unrolling car-bound landscape of malls, traffic islands, beggars and gated Tuscan villages?
- b. A neglected and abused downtown offering tantalising glimpses (if you can risk it) into the ‘exotic’ and/or ‘dangerous’ lives of others?
- c. Townships you can look at on an organized tour through a bus window? (More lives of the ‘others’.)
- d. Museums to the multiple tragedies of our apartheid past, all of which more or less look alike? (Identify the differences between museums? An extra 10 points to be gained here.)
- e. The joy of travel: Views of intensely ramshackle slums while flying in to land, or from high speed highways? A rapid road side view of an RDP housing scheme?
- f. Your luxury Sandton hotel?

- g. A small shopping street in one of the older suburbs, containing restaurants, galleries, shops, offices?
- h. The home of a friend – heavily fortified, a cultural opportunity to learn the complexities of the alarm system before a late night out?
- i. The Sandton City complex / Rosebank Mall / Melrose Arch / Montecasino?

Please note that the above is a trick question. Most of the choices involve being in transit.

Only four choices are ‘destinations’: places that you can negotiate and occupy for more than two hours by walking, by sitting, by talking, watching at leisure. By partaking.

Three of these destinations are made up of the sumptuous displays contained in malls, and the safe and luxurious hotels and homes all hyped up and isolated by the thrill of danger lurking beyond. What is culturally noteworthy about any of these destinations? These, too, are all exclusive interiors. The gated mixed use complex of Melrose Arch, significantly, is an exclusive interior, its back resolutely turned to the city and its lesser citizens. Are we really just that – a ‘world-class interior’? What of the city, then, beyond its vicarious existence as an ‘outside’ to be looked at from the window of a car, a tour bus?

Are we really just that - a ‘world-class interior’?

There is only one destination listed above which might [deserve] the term ‘cultural destination’ beyond a two hour museum visit, and that is option g). Only this destination might have a feel of ‘community’ from which nothing except your time con-



The interior of the Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst.
Photo: Adriaan Louw

straints would exclude you. Only this one has what might be called an accessible ‘local flavour’ in which you could make – as a visitor – a temporary home in the exterior of the city.

Joburg is going to have to re-conceive itself in terms of ‘cultural destination’ if it is to be perceived as a city that is ‘world-class’. ‘World-class’ must imply a peculiarly local consciousness that would act to distinguish Joburg both in and from the world.



Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst.
Photo: Adriaan Louw

to learn Joburg from the inside out – and this insight, I think, would apply across the social board – the stratifications and differences of which only amplify the condition. To me, this imparts a certain mystique to the city, a mystique that I think provides a creative key towards a renewal, a re-definition, a creative re-reading of ourselves.

It seems strange to me that we still call the unrolling extensions to the city ‘Joburg’. They represent

only half of the entwined culture: they are shallow and showy, and cheap. But they allow no concealment, paradoxically, no privacy – in this most privatized of cultures. They leave nothing to the imagination except the imagination of inclusion. They give no possibility of depth, of depth of time, of depth of inhabitation. All interiors seem the same, gleaned from Mr. Price and the lifestyle magazines. In spite of their booms and security guards, the whole is tuned to display. Concealment, in these areas, means danger. Half the culture has been left behind.

Amazingly, it is only in the Mall that I see a remnant of this culture, and this is – perhaps – why we are beset with mall culture. Every new agglomeration of suburbs is mall-centred. Could we see the Mall as the most cynical and twisted referent of the twin culture? Concealment of display. Display of concealment. Cultural destination?

And with that, I return to cultural destinations, and option g): the possibilities of ‘urban experience’, or ‘cultural destination’ still held in the older shopping street. The few open ‘shopping streets’ left in Joburg are relics of smaller suburban centres: these were short stretches of commercial zoning within the larger matrix of colour coded domesticity. Joburg’s business flight from the inner city has operated on a few scales: on the high end we have Sandton City and the new mall-centred gated suburban rollout. At the lower end, we see a continuous conversion of houses to business. The larger traffic conduits are sites of extreme make-over, and the smaller existing shopping streets have generally expanded in a linear fashion through the fairly limited ‘frontal’ conversion of houses and gardens. Originally concealed houses are here turned to display, turned to the street – gardens brick paved for parking.

Paul Smith is an internationally celebrated British clothes designer. His first two shops in South Africa were opened by Anthony Keyworth and Richard Shaw in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2007. The Johannesburg shop took the singular decision to exist outside of a mall environment, on the premise that – internationally – the Paul Smith brand has always occupied ‘urban’ premises. Its shops exist on the street, often re-using buildings to create a somewhat eccentric urban image which contributes to the culture of the ‘street’. The Paul Smith LA shop – on the contrary, is a new build, and carries an extreme architectural image, as it forms part and parcel of LA’s drive-by culture.

The site chosen for Paul Smith Joburg is on the corner of 4th Avenue and 7th Street in Parkhurst – a prominent position on the busy little shopping street. The building that occupied this site was a nondescript, many times altered house dating from the post-war mass build of Parkhurst, now sporting a fake Georgian portico and colonnade.

I was asked, one Friday afternoon, to do a sketch design that Anthony and Richard could take to Paul Smith in London two days later. My visceral design response, that Friday afternoon, was to take the roof off, leave the portico as a small scale gesture to the street, and to cantilever a large and uncompromising glass container over the top, partially visible through the trees. Originally the idea for the flush jointed glass box was that various decorative stickers (the trademark Paul Smith stripe / various decals appropriate to the collection of the moment, full colour textile type signage etc.) could come and go in time across the glass façade.

As we proceeded, the glass became solid pink in



Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst.
Photo: Adriaan Louw

reference to the giant pink box of the LA shop, the older cousin of Joburg’s drive-by culture. The structure was resolved as a singular system that kills all birds with one stone, allowing the pink glass box to cantilever off the original shell, floating free.

Several years previously, I designed the Gallery Momo – nearby on 7th Avenue. Being an architect concerned with thematic conceptual development through my body of work, I’d like to draw some parallels between Gallery Momo and Paul Smith. Apart from the fact that the buildings are near each other, and both derive from houses in commercialized suburban shopping strips, what interests me is the way that each messes with the word “container”, and with the words ‘display’ and ‘concealment’.

Momo, to some extents, is a suburban house turned inside out, its most prime contents turned to drive-by high speed display. A container, decipherable at speed.

Paul Smith, unlike Momo, is a kind of blind box – a mall prototype – a deaf mute – in bright pink

glass, non-transparent. A floating mall in the trees. A branding exercise. No shop windows to speak of. The multi-coloured signage of the mall interior becomes here externalized in homogenized and uniform display – you could think of it as a largely blank billboard. Paul Smith has landed. A large pink wrapped parcel. A non-compromising gesture. A container. A sealed box. An exclusion. The interior and the wares are hidden, another Joburg secret.

a largely blank billboard. Paul Smith has landed.

I thought about Paul Smith in terms of the “imaginary of shopping for clothes”: the potential of the “new you”, the dislocation of that moment ... mall blindness. Inside the shop you’ll find men’s wear at the ground level, a more prosaic space of belts and ties and shirts, and upstairs, the women’s wear hovers in a sort of ethereal pink glow ... there is the possibility of a new world, a new me, a new you ... all at vast expense of course. Exclusionary.

This is mall-ification – the myth, the dream world of the mall, the dislocated cyberspace of ultra capitalism. The language of the outer suburbs comes to town, comes to a small street, one where it is still possible to walk, to talk, to shop, to eat, to watch, to live. This building is not a solution – it is a game, played on an idea of Joburg culture.

This culture of Joburg: its knowingness, its insider knowledge, its mystique, its twin desires: display and concealment Its glittering, hard surfaces Its controlled entries Its paranoia Its hidden, and lush interiors Its mania for branding This building treats these things. But it treats them critically. It treats them in a way which does not threat-

en the street, which does not drain and suck the life out of it, which does not limit one’s access to one’s own city, which does not condemn one, endlessly, to the same. This building talks to landmark, to bearings, to navigation, to destination, to identity – to the eroticism of shopping, of *flânerie*. Of wondering what something hides. It speaks at once to its specific place: Joburg, and it speaks to the world.

This building exists in a global architectural reality of shops by architects. It speaks to individual choice, to the art of architecture, to a specific reading of culture, and the possibilities of place.