

DESIGN IN MOTION? URBAN DESIGN AND THE POST-APARTHEID CITY

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Sarah Calburn, an architect in private practice in Johannesburg, and Achille Mbembe a research professor in history and politics, discuss the tensions and possibilities of urban design and the post-apartheid city.

Achille Mbembe (AM): I would like to start our conversation with a question on urban planning. Urban planning is not simply a product of the social organization of knowledge. How a society builds and arranges its urban space and environment also tells us something about the way it defines itself, its moral boundaries, its symbolic and cultural systems. When I first came to Johannesburg, having lived in Paris, New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Dakar, it was as if the city was still paying the price of its originary congenital malformation, that is, its birth in the crucible of racial capitalism. It looked to me, then, as if apartheid urban planning was a mere translation of a dark public secret - Apartheid's paranoia and primitive response to otherness. How would you characterize the state of urban planning or design in South Africa today?

Sarah Calburn (SC): It seems obvious to me, as a spatial practitioner, that South African urban planning still acts largely to maintain our deep social divides, in the process rendering them increasingly



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

irreparable. In the main, current development across the board is severely impoverishing our cities, our present and future selves. What we have currently in the guise of “urban design” appears merely as the progressive hardening of a calloused and damaged present that is inexplicably devoted to its calloused and damaged past. “Urban planning” in South Africa has not yet become “urban design”.

AM: Could you elaborate on the difference between “urban planning” and “urban design”?

SC: The act of “design” holds implicit the imagination of previously unimagined futures. If it is to be experimental and innovative, “design” demands the adoption of critical approaches that are able to open current problems to new potentials and solutions. One would think that the projection of a future scenario via “urban design” should be directed to the optimistic creation of urban space that can both frame and nurture a vibrant, diverse society in lively,

meaningful and mutually respectful conversation both internally and in the world.

Crucially, “design” demands the adoption of altered points of view, of new ways of seeing and reading ourselves and our realities. It is only through these “recognitions” that we can start to imaginatively extrapolate ourselves, to build creatively on our own particular qualities and quantities. Urban design, thus, demands a re-imagination of who we are and who we might become. This pivotal attitude appears to be the missing factor in Johannesburg contemporary quest to be a “World Class City”.

AM: What about planning?

SC: Planning as we know it in this city is still directed to simplistic “problem-solving” via largely uncritical diagrammatisation of existing social relationships. It acts only to entrench historical spatial and societal divisions. The wide open flatlands of RDP housing (the Reconstruction and Development Programme initiated in the immediate aftermath of Apartheid) is only one of the pernicious examples that could be cited.

AM: You speak as if nothing has changed since Meadowlands.

SC: Indeed it seems physically as if nothing has changed except the quality of construction – which, terrifyingly, has worsened. The endless unrolling of the franchised urban environment is another example, made as it is of repetitive fortified enclaves and identical quasi-public shopping malls.

The net effect of these homogeneous and exclusive developments is that the public domain in



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

Johannesburg has gone missing, presumed dead. Public terrain has been reduced to left over land; the traffic islands, the under-equipped pavements that make up the connective tissue of our cities. The very pre-condition of successful cities – a connective urban commonality – is so structurally weak that it cannot hold us together.

AM: Without blaming everything on urban planning, could we then argue that instead of eliciting reactions of curiosity, astonishment and connectivity, the kind of urban planning we inherited from apartheid fuels anxieties, awakes aggressivity and fosters blindness?

SC: It is clear to me that we still cannot see each other. We still do not know each other fifteen years after liberation. This is partly because there are no physical spaces in this city in which we can interact safely. There are no physical points of contact which are not considered threatening. We are eternally blinkered, both hiding and hidden from each

one another in the franchised car-bound landscape, where the “public” is characterized as criminal simply because access is denied to everything except the left-over space. In these left-over spaces, you can be arrested for “loitering”, while the “private” glides seamlessly (windows tight shut) from guarded interior to guarded interior.

Spatially, politically, culturally and economically, it would appear that in the “new” South Africa, apartheid has morphed seamlessly into a noxious private-public divide. Separate development is alive and well in 21st century South Africa. It is dismayingly strange to note, now, the color coded parallel tracks in the visual metaphor of our failing “rainbow nation”.

AM: Speaking of the public/private divide, historically we do have in this rugged and hard-edged city of Johannesburg a tradition of mass movements if not of “public-ness”. What do you make of this tradition?

SC: The “public” in South Africa still seems to be characterized as “the Masses”. These are “the People” who, to a large extent, are still considered ungovernable, at least in their daily struggles for survival. The “private”, of course, are the elite – “us”. The language of both Apartheid and The Struggle, in equal and hideous measure, would still seem to pertain. Who are these people, these masses, if not us, the citizens who share this country, these cities, these suburbs and these roads?

AM: Johannesburg managers have been trying to depict the city as a “world class city”. What is the meaning of this exercise?



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

SC: This is in essence a febrile branding exercise that simplistically interprets an undigested fragment of received knowledge. A World Class City, I would presume, is identifiable as such: a unique externally accessible urban environment available to all; a city that is owned and made legible by its citizens; a city available to all whether from home or abroad.

Where in Johannesburg, I would ask, is this “World Class City”? In the walled-off-tree-lined streetscapes of Parkview? In the decaying and vibrant streets of the inner city? On the highways



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

past ramshackle slums? In the lavish interiors of Sandton? In the abandoned industrial edges of Alexandra? In the paranoid communities of Diepsloot or Dainfern? In the flashy white elephants of our newly built stadia – these isolated icons entirely cut off from their surrounding communities? In the invisible streets of Soweto and Lenasia?

The carpet continues to be pulled from beneath our feet as whole areas are abandoned to decay, become subject to successive waves of immigration, are demolished or are radically and secretly re-deployed. Previously accessible areas wall themselves off, become “no-go zones” to either “the masses” or “the elite”, and generally – in the wealthiest areas – give away, un-protesting, to all the hype and all the stereotype.

AM: Let’s come back for a moment to the theme of urban design. You keep coming back to the question of accessibility and public-ness. You seem to suggest that apartheid has morphed into new forms of “separate development”. You seem to be gestur-

ing to a different kind of city that would be a city of connectivity, a city founded on some notion of commonality and mutuality. Are you suggesting that urban design in our context and in view of our history is necessarily a political act?

SC: If we aspire to some kind of common nationhood, it is time we find our “points of contact”, the clues that might allow us to build a common language, a common urbanity, a society in mutually sustaining motion. We urgently need to re-read



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

ourselves out of our internalized attitudes of fight or flight. We need an exit strategy from the histories that continue to construct the urban landscape and the urban psyche through defensive tactics of aggrandizement and fortification and despair. Our task now is to find the mutualities that can open us out into positive, shared urban futures that can heal this divided nation.

AM: You spoke of the quasi-absence of a public domain. But you also referred to Johannesburg as a city of “interiors”. Could you reflect a bit more about this dialectic of public-ness/private/interior and how it might help us to rethink the entire project of urban design in our own context?

SC: When you think about it, it would be more accurate and productive to suggest that Johannesburg could call itself a “World Class Interior”. It is our interiors that form the spaces we consider safe. These



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

are our historic spaces, hidden from the prying eye. These are the spaces in which we feel free to be who we are; in which we loudly voice our opinions. These are the spaces between which we are continually in motion, eyes wide shut. These are the spaces into which we usher, unctuously, our visitors.

AM: Should we therefore re-conceptualize the notion of “public space” and re-invent public-ness it-



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

self as an extension or a refolding of the qualities of our interiors?

SC: What stops us from considering urban landscapes as interiors? In my own work, I already conceive of interiors as landscapes. What stops us from changing our thinking to conceive of the public spaces of our city as large interiors in which we are all welcome? Can we move the strengths of our interior spaces out into the open?

AM: Doesn't this require some kind of shared language, knowledge or code? And if you are right about the density and richness of our interiors, wouldn't this imply that part of what characterizes Johannesburg is something we could call its "cultures of the interiors" – a counterpoint to the negative definitions of the city we have dealt with so far in this conversation?

SC: Spatially and architecturally, contemporary Johannesburg is a multi-layered polymorph of both

visible and invisible cultures. Most of these cultures appear to exist entirely independently of each other. Interestingly however, the many identities of the city would seem to be characterized by what I would call simultaneous cultures of display and concealment. The city is not discoverable by its surfaces. Displays usually accompanied by security booms at varying scales of lock-out, and concealment requires either guts or the cultural/economic keys to penetrate. What is engendered in Johannesburg, then, is an exaggerated culture of "inside knowledge".

This simultaneity is paradoxical, and witnessed by the following examples: the highly decorated entrances to gated villa complexes; the silence of a treeless field of RDP houses; the sign-dominated flat exteriors of shopping malls; the Ethiopian interiors of re-used CBD buildings; the impenetrable township maze; the no-expense-spared houses behind walls. The crux of the matter is that we, as a city and as a society, all deal in these coded conditions all the time. This is a common culture that once deconstructed and opened to critical scrutiny, could be used to beneficial strategic design effect in order to bring about a more balanced urban environment.

AM: Concretely, how in your view could the culture you are describing form the basis of design strategies that could themselves help to reinvigorate the idea of the public and of the common?

SC: This culture could form the basis of design strategies that take us towards new building form and space-making techniques that do not need to rely on the fence, the boundary wall or homogeneous zoning strategies as their only safe-guarding tactics. What



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

needs to happen, then, alongside this kind of interrogation is a critical re-examination of the outdated Town-Planning regulations that still act to limit our urban forms and possibilities. Simply being able to build to the suburban street boundary using a mix of domestic, retail and public amenity could induce major urban strategic possibility. The public "pavement" sphere could undergo a major overhaul for the common good, while treating simultaneously both local conditions of display and concealment.

AM: In our own work, Sarah Nuttall and I have defined Johannesburg not as a "world class city", but as "an elusive metropolis" that nevertheless point to Afropolitan forms of urbanity. Could the trope of "Afropolitanism" become the other name of the kind of urbanities your own conception of design is pointing to?

SC: We have numerous examples of a particularly Afropolitan urban commonality already in existence or in the making. The urban spaces of Hillbrow,

Yeoville, Soweto and Alexandra all function at a number of levels simultaneously. Diverse yet integrated patterns of living, working and playing are all waiting to be identified and extrapolated into sustainable 21st century community-based urbanities. Depressingly, these patterns are regarded by most Johannesburgers as threatening, as uncontrollable and chaotic, simply because they are ramshackle and poverty-stricken and colour-coded. These patterns appear hermetic and unreadable.



Johannesburg, courtesy Sarah Calburn.

The fact of the matter is that these circumstances contain giant design cues towards the development of unique, Afropolitan and world-class architectural environments if only we could see them as such. Sustainable cities demand exactly these kinds of propinquities and feed-back loops, these “points of contact”, and we ignore our local examples at our own peril. The roll-out of RDP housing around Alexandra is nothing short of evil. It displays a crass blindness and disrespect shoved in the face of a

community that has managed to maintain, against all odds, the rarest and most valuable inter-cultural, mixed-use core urban heritage.

AM: You are advocating place-bound, local design solutions as a way to create the “points of contact” without which our cities will not be cities at all. Using the metaphor of “points of contact”, how do you evaluate the urban renewal strategies associated with the 2010 Soccer World Cup?

SC: We have in fact had many of these opportunities in the last couple of years for the making of “points of contact”. The World Cup, the Gautrain and the BRT (Bus Rapid Transport) are the first truly “public platforms” that Johannesburg has consciously laid out in years. However, all these projects remain steadfastly independent of the adjacent available systems that might build urban commonality.

Why, for instance, does the BRT exist as a challenge to the taxi system? Why has it not forged adjacencies with parks, schools and public squares? Why has a study been commissioned to find out why the BRT doesn’t work? Why does the Gautrain end up re-fortifying the exclusive enclave of Rosebank? Why do the stadia leave the formation of ‘Fan Parks’ out in the cold: panicky design solutions requested too late in the day to work properly? Why does the Street Soccer global event (free for audiences) held in Alexandra during the World Cup remain unpublicized? Why does the city not recognize that it is precisely through the solicitation of innovative architectural and urban thinking that we can build an Afropolitan World Class city?

Received models are not going to do the trick. We require some directed and lateral self-interrogation

in order to rise above our general levels of mediocre expectation, lack of imagination and damaged self-hood into recognizable spheres of global innovation and design.

AM: Do you see, in this current moment, any “point of contact” already in operation, or do we have to invent everything from scratch?

SC: The main “points of contact” I see operating now are on the radio. On account of talk show hosts like Redi Direko and Tim Modise we have topical debates open for comment by all. And the “all” do comment, from their vastly differing points of view. A truly discursive society is a society in mutual motion, a society in mutual space. It can hardly be borne of societies contained in multiple landscapes of lock-out and threat, or cement itself through faceless individuals meeting solely in virtual scapes. Virtual discursive space is crucial, but how do we recognize each other in public? Without a conscious spatial construction of “points of contacts”, our cities can hardly be construed as cities at all.