

## Urban Inversion: Rewriting South Africa's Public Landscape

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Entry to the new Constitutional Court, Johannesburg South Africa, 2007 courtesy of Clinton Hindes

South Africa is a country in the formative years of its democracy, still deeply divided by the governmental planning decisions of the Apartheid era (1948-1994), but making progress in the massive efforts to provide housing, education, and access to resources to its 47 million citizens. In a political transition described as miraculous, the new democratic government has identified diversity as a key strength, a cultural value to guide future articulation of the built environment; from the production and upgrading of housing and extension of transportation networks and urban infrastructure, to new civic architecture and the enhancement of the public realm.

With an insufficient first-world infrastructure that historically privileged the white Afrikaans and British South African minorities and continues to separate people along lines of socio-economic difference, South Africa is challenged not only to meet the daily needs and desires of a diverse and disparate populace but to rewrite the fundamental

national narratives that entitle all of its citizens to the public realm. Dagmar Hoetzel (2005), curator of *Fast Forward Johannesburg*, a German exhibition exploring how South Africa's new democratic order is being reflected in buildings going up in its commercial capital explains, "in no other country does architecture and urban planning bear such vivid witness to history, to politics, and to social division. And these deeply embedded traces of apartheid remain ubiquitous in South Africa today".

The recognition of eleven national languages exemplifies South Africa's commitment to negotiate difference through processes of listening, translation and dialogue. In a period of economic growth concurrent with political will to improve living conditions in both rural and urban areas, South Africa is a veritable laboratory for examining design strategies that engage citizenship, democracy and public space. To narrate is to ascribe meaning, to come to know the world through the stories lived and told. Narrative design strategies that engage difference, or as Michael Rios argues for, "strategies that begin with difference as a starting point in the design of public space" are *de rigueur* in South Africa.

As the government addresses this task of rewriting national public space on a project by project basis from the Constitutional Court- District in Johannesburg to Freedom Park in Pretoria, parallel efforts are being made to privatize public plazas and to increase the security hardware (electric fences, razor wire) surrounding private middle and upper class homes and entire neighborhoods (gate and boom); effectively armoring the edges of most city streets. Landman explains in her article "Who Owns the Roads: Privatizing public space in South

African cities through neighborhood enclosures", through their very nature "{neighborhood enclosures} could even further create another barrier to integration and interaction and may add to the problem of building social networks that provide opportunity for social and economic activities." Significantly, the privatization of public space affects both access to and perception of the commons. She suggests that redressing this urban socio-spatial inequality (to facilitate development), requires challenging exclusionary mind-sets i.e. symbolic rather than physical space.

New national landmarks are venues for expressing and influencing cultural interpretations of what it means to be South African, and there is much to be learned from the agonistic commitment on the part of the government, the design community, and many citizens of South Africa to new narratives that premise diversity and the common humanity of all people. These national monuments, now international tourist destinations, potentially draw people together from every other place on earth. The global narrative, which Presidents Mandela and Mbeki have been conscientiously articulating through the creation of these sites of memory and beacons to the future, is that *in* South Africa's history lies the hope of the world.

At the official handover of the Indigenous Knowledge garden of Freedom Park on 8 March 2004, President Thabo Mbeki said that Freedom Park would be a place for all to meditate on what had been achieved in South Africa. Freedom Park, Mbeki said, "would not be a place of grief and mourning but of celebration, a tribute to African and human dignity, and a place for the renewal of the human spirit".

There are certainly many significant landscape/architectural projects taking place across the country in this time of reconstruction that serve the public in a more intimate everyday way; schools, government buildings, neighborhood and regional parks, that do not reference a grand narrative of unity and justice. These projects respond with dignity to their surrounding neighborhood, become civic destinations, and strengthen local connections between people and their home place. Concerned with resourcefulness, flexibility of program, provision of appropriate spaces, fostering social networks, stimulating economic opportunity, relating to the neighborhood context,

and engaging community in art and construction, many architects of the everyday do not address the meta-narrative of the "rainbow nation". Critique of the obsession with "the mise en scene of democracy... that attempts to translate the Mandela mythology", while the dream seems increasingly unrealizable to many, has been proffered by Matthew Barac (2007). Relevant as this may be, it remains instructional to study the role of national projects in documenting and memorializing the past, translating history to inform the present, and constructing the public meeting grounds for the 21<sup>st</sup> century non-racist, non-sexist democratic society.

### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR DIALOGUE

A crucial aspect of the peaceful transition from the Apartheid government to democratic leadership by the African National Congress (ANC) and the formation of a united democratic South Africa, was the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), led by Former President Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu respectively. In the two plus years that hearings were held throughout the country (1995-98), testimony of personal experience was the center piece of the process. Stories of human rights violations were described before the commission side by side confessions of heinous crimes committed, many reparations were made and amnesty granted. With the intention of freeing the truth and moving towards reconciliation, the nation devoted significant time and energy to the narration of personal experience, as integral to the larger re-balancing of power. Excruciatingly painful, and fraught with challenges at every level, the TRC process lay the ground for the construction of a new democracy. The TRC also recognized in conclusion the need for national sites of healing and reconciliation.

*Fast forward* thirteen years later; the nation itself has had time to reflect, and to narrate its own history. Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and new museums across the country from the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg to the Red Location Museum in Brighton are telling the stories of the freedom fighters, of the successive waves and generations of struggle and revolution. The two sites of focus in this article, Freedom Park and the Constitutional Court, are noteworthy in the urban scale and integrative ap-

proach to design of their public space. Beyond the program of one building or park, they are visions to re-stitch entire neighborhoods back into the fabric of the city, to create districts of city-wide significance that function as national and international landmarks of freedom and democracy.

With tourism to South Africa growing at a rate three times the international average (8.4 million visitors in 2006 from across Africa and around the world), these sites of national significance become relevant to a global discussion of architecture of the social imaginary, the role of the architect in bringing forth new visions of public urban space. The ancient South African landscape, referred to as the "cradle of civilization", can now offer the world both a deeper understanding of the origin of humanity and the hope for its future. As post-colonial cities battle to rename themselves, the "right to narrate" is proclaimed on the world map. The capital city of Pretoria is now part of the greater metropolitan area of Tshwane. With the imminent hosting of such international events as the World Cup Soccer tournament in 2010 the former "skunk of the world" is gaining new international reputation. The narrative is powerful. "It's impossible! greets the visitor to the national website. On Pretoria's southern skyline opposite the formidable Voortrekker Monument, juxtaposing the past with the processes of moving forward, the bright arc of Freedom Park proclaims in its disintegration and recombination, the dynamic potential of a new nation.

#### **NARRATING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, NEW VISIONS OF PUBLIC URBAN SPACE**

The following two case studies: The Constitutional Court/Constitution Hill and Freedom Park are embedded within larger urban revitalization schemes intended to promote heritage preservation and stimulate local economic development and tourism. Each is supported with enhanced access and connections to transit, affordable housing initiatives in the surrounding neighborhood and improvements to local infrastructure. These projects reinterpret the trajectory of South African history at these specific locations, each chosen in part for the poignancy of its physical/symbolic inversion of the past. They function as urban acupuncture points, releasing tensions and stimulating new energy. The Constitutional Court district and Freedom Park also test the capacity of narrative design

to create democratic public spaces that allow for multiple experiences and interpretations, accommodate multiple publics, and facilitate encounters and interactions across difference.

Henning Rasmuss, director of Paragon Architects, in Johannesburg commented in an article entitled, "Public Space? In Johannesburg?" (2004) that, Johannesburg, a city shaped by its history of gold and "centered on exploitation and convenient reinvention" is hardly known for its public spaces. However, in the newest period of reinvention, the rush of democracy has fueled interest in urban renewal projects and commitment to the enhancement of the public realm. Rasmuss explains, "perhaps we have realized one thing: in order for public space to exist and to add to real quality of life, public buildings need to support it. Good public buildings which absorb real needs. Here, our new market structures and taxi ranks have allowed our streets and pavements to work for ordinary citizens once more."

These new national projects absorb additional needs of a culture to remember its past and dream its future. Constitutional Hill and Freedom Park re-stake the physical and ethical high ground, the sacred rock, inscribing the significance of the new constitutional democracy in the land, and commemorating the Struggle for freedom in new public meeting grounds for all of South Africa's people. As beacons on the global design skyline, South African architects are forging a new language that takes its form from processes of translation of meaning in the collaborations of place-making.

Dolores Hayden in her book: *The Power of Place, Public Landscapes as Cultural History* reminds us that "change is not simply a matter of acknowledging diversity or correcting a traditional bias toward the architectural legacy of wealth and power (1997:9)." Rather, what is required is a larger conceptual framework to support urban residents demand for a far more inclusive "cultural citizenship" She reminds us that urban landscapes are storehouses for social memories, "because natural features such as hills or harbors, streets, buildings and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes."

The two case studies chosen to illustrate what the author is calling a narrative inversion of South African public space, will examine how these new

design narratives fulfill goals of inclusiveness, and make physical space that facilitates dialogue across difference. Each case study will be discussed in terms of a public design process and with the understanding that such young projects (neither fully complete) can only be fairly assessed in the future. The projects offer new visions not merely for multi-cultural vernacular, but experiences of trans-cultural citizenship.

### THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT, CONSTITUTION HILL, JOHANNESBURG



View of the Constitutional Court and the walls of the Old Fort, photo courtesy of Clinton Hindes

"Freedom, Democracy, equal opportunity, diversity, responsibility, reconciliation and respect. These ideals form the foundation of the new South African Constitution and are the values that the new building of the Constitutional Court sets out to convey. The Court has been constructed on a site chosen for its intense symbolism: the Old Fort prison in central Johannesburg, a place of captivity and suffering in the apartheid years. The building embodies the victory of idealism and human rights over cruelty and despair, and reflects the openness and transparency called for in the Constitution". (Deckler, Graupner, and Rasmuss, 2006.19)

In 1995 the new South African Constitutional Court began looking for a permanent location that would be both central to the city of Johannesburg and rich in cultural history. The site that was chosen was the Old Fort prison complex, commonly known as Number Four, one of South Africa's most notorious prisons. At the height of apartheid rule, up to 2 000 black South Africans were processed through its entrance daily. Political prisoners as well as common criminals awaited trial there and waited out sentences through a detention period

that was characterized by brutality and deprivation. Struggle stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Ruth First and Nelson Mandela were among many prominent internees of the Old Fort. The prison was closed in 1983, leaving a scar on Johannesburg's metropolis. In the transformation from former prison to seat of justice, the history of the South African people and landscape has been effectively rewritten".

Constitution Hill is part of a multi-million rand inner city renewal process being driven by Gauteng province's development agency, Blue IQ, and the City of Johannesburg. Constitution Hill forms one point of a "cultural arc" that sweeps through Braamfontein - taking in the Civic Centre and Wits University - and across the Nelson Mandela Bridge to Newtown.

Hannah le Roux describes this reversal of civic identity and significance in her article "Hell/Whole: The Inversion of Constitution Hill" (Art South Africa, 2004). She explains that "while the experiences of everyday life as it transforms under political change may, for many South African citizens bring glimpses of what it was like to be in someone else's shoes under apartheid, the intention of the Constitutional Hill project appears to be to wistfully represent these inversions." This extreme reversal of function and implication is not lost in redevelopment, rather intensified through the architectural and social programming of the space, mediated through temporary and permanent art installations that convey the experiences of life inside the pre-Apartheid and Apartheid era prison.

Informed by a succession of historical surveys, expert consultants, and citizen workshops, visions for the future court house district were generated through competition, and translated into architecture by OMM Design Workshop of Durban and Urban Solutions of Johannesburg. From the outset, the project was conceived as a public precinct. The strategy has been to preserve most of the old prison and its internal paths to maximize the juxtaposition of past and future while allowing visitors to learn about both the history of the prison and the new role of the Constitution and Court in protecting human rights and freedoms. Connections to the surrounding urban residential "ghetto" Hillbrow and the city center are open, and the court itself is accessible to the public. Le

Roux explains, “not only is the access to the court chamber for the public intentionally direct, but the buildings formal language shakes off (nearly) any association with neo-classicalism, the favoured style of court buildings”.



“The Great African Steps”, Constitutional Hill, Johannesburg

The design of the Constitutional Court building itself is a celebration of values, not a static symbolism but a dynamic invitation to imagine and participate in a non-racist, non-sexist democracy. The correspondence of the Great African Steps to the interior hall of the Court building leading to Court is a dialogue between inside and out and more specifically about the history and future of South Africa. Using bricks of the old prison to recast the story of Africa is a reversal that will be felt in the tread of every visitors steps, reflected in the buildings transparent façade, repeated in photographs of the place, and reinforced with each case that comes before the court. Outside the court, the new Constitution Square is punctuated with the partly-demolished remains of the Awaiting Trial block. All that stands is a staircase, now topped with a lantern to illuminate the Johannesburg skyline, affording a view beyond to the Magaliesburg mountain range. Inside the courtroom itself where the eleven judges preside, the flag of South Africa hangs larger than life, constructed of tiny colorful beads hand stitched together.

The long-term success of this project will be determined by its ability to integrate with the surrounding neighborhoods, to become a public space through which people travel and in which people gather on a daily basis. Public programming is an important component of the new life of the district

and includes regular and special group tours as well as training for future tour-guides, lectures, music and performances, art installations and shows. Development of mixed-use housing, and transportation infrastructure at the periphery of the hill will help revitalize and redefine the district.

#### FREEDOM PARK, CITY OF TSHWANE



The Freedom Sculpture, entitled “The Reeds”, Freedom Park. Sculpture by Marco Cianfanelli.

This key Presidential Legacy Project emanated from diverse sources including citizens, non-governmental organizations, academics and various political interest groups. The emergence of Freedom Park was further prompted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission who identified the need for Symbolic Reparation for victims of past atrocities. Set on the Salvokop hilltop with sublime views of Pretoria, Freedom Park is a memorial and landmark dedicated to both healing the past and dreaming the future on a national scale. Processes of community participation have been choreographed across the country to inform and activate the physical/symbolic design of the site.

The Freedom Park Trust explains, “these structures and their processes unfold the progression towards the spiritual unification of the South African nation, symbolized in the creation of the Garden of Remembrance ([freedomparktrust.org.za](http://freedomparktrust.org.za)).” The site has ambitious goals: to provide a place that is part of the national ritual of cleansing and healing, to create a sacred resting place for the heroes and heroines who have died in the struggles for freedom, and to become a center of indigenous African knowledge interpreting the history of humanity and dreaming the future. The

design draws on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and African symbolism translating cultural practices of healing and reconciling to the nation, raising questions about what is found and what is lost in translation.

As a national landmark, Freedom Park also seeks to tell the story of South Africa to the world. The poignant juxtaposition of the Freedom Sculpture of “The Reeds” with the Voortrekker Monument is a artistic gesture of inversion, a rewriting of history that envisions the future not in the erasure of the past but in its continuum. The Voortrekker Monument, a 40-meter tall, massive granite monument to commemorate the Boer’s great trek across South Africa (to establish a new capital for the Republic after winning the Zulu Wars), can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. Built in 1937, it has symbolized a cultural order on the landscape, monolithic and almighty. By contrast the entire 52 hectare program of Freedom Park situates itself so as not to disturb the silhouette of the Salvokop hilltop. The slender metal shoots of The Reeds, proclaim unity in difference and at night on Pretoria’s skyline form an illuminated sculptural arc, the symbol of the Rainbow Nation.

Lead Landscape Architect Graham Young of Newtown Landscape Architects describes the evolution of the conceptual design as an iterative process between the design team—including landscape architects, and architects—and an advisory panel established by Freedom Park Trust. The panel included traditional healers, artists and academics specializing in African culture and in-



Freedom Park, Isivivane, Pretoria, photo courtesy of Newtown Landscape Architects

igenous knowledge systems, who provided information and guidance on cultural matters. In addition, the Trust arranged consultative workshops with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, drawn from across the country and representing youth, women, traditional leaders, labour, creative artists, veterans, the disabled, the Afrikaanse Kultuur & Taal Vereeniging and various religious organizations. An at-times excruciating process of communication and negotiation, has yielded unforeseen points of mutuality.

Translation and dialogue across difference at the design table was the democratic premise of this project. The requirement of the Trust to apply IKS including medicinal plant knowledge, ritual and ceremony to the contemporary landscape/architecture has greatly enriched the vocabulary of the park, and pushed the limits of creative place-making through a process of cultural fusion. Drawing on a Jungian worldview that the cultures of the world are united by universal archetypes, NLA has created a new model of civic meeting ground, offering opportunities to find peace and offer reconciliation in addition to more typical passive recreational opportunities and more dynamic processes of learning and interaction. The profound connection to the African landscape that unites all South African’s is manifested in this garden of stone and water that invites dwelling.

The goal is to create a deeper understanding of South Africa and its people through a landscape narrative beginning with the origins of civilization. The Freedom Park Trust explains, “it will retell South Africa’s story, to dispel the many myths and prejudices that have concealed its true history and distorted the richness of its cultural heritage. Beyond acknowledging the past, Freedom Park will celebrate the achievement of democracy and stand as a beacon of hope for the future. It is envisaged to become a place of pilgrimage, renewal and inspiration for South Africans and all humanity.” While it is still to soon to tell how people will inhabit the park, and how it will begin to relate to renovations happening in the historic railway workers district of Salvokop, the design process and the struggle to communicate across difference on the part of the design team has resulted in a new place of encounter with South African history and culture that addresses the collective history of humanity within the specificity of the South African landscape.

This project has generated healthy debate across seemingly irreconcilable differences in culture, religion and politics, about the application of indigenous knowledge systems, the role of spiritual practices in national places and the feasibility/desirability of a "spiritually unified" South Africa. Debate has centered on which eras of history and which fallen soldiers should be honored in "the wall of names", in other words, what are the parameters of inclusiveness.

In South Africa today where the very foundations of knowledge are being hotly debated and revised, and the right to respectfully disagree is paramount, Freedom Park is a public place which connects our diverse human cultures back to the origin of our commonality, our relationship to the land and forward to a collective future. Through the native vernacular of stone, water, mist, and indigenous plants, the structuring of landscape experience: walking, resting, observing and enjoying the view, and the inscribing of meaning through symbols and narrative, a story is composed for all to read. If landscape is truly a universal language, the South African public landscape narrative has the potential to touch the world.

## CONCLUSION

Leonie Sandercock in her book *Cosmopolis 2: Mongrel Cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, articulates the challenge for designers of public places in creating responsive democratic ground; "we need to find a way to publicly manifest the significance of cultural diversity, and to debate the value of various identities/differences; that is, to ask which differences exist, but should not, and which do not exist, but should." South Africa is fertile ground for the study of public places that strive towards inclusiveness through public participation, a trans-cultural vernacular, and a common grounding in landscape. The narrative inversion happening across South Africa as new national projects celebrate the triumph of democracy over authoritarian rule is particularly poignant in these sites that form bridges between previously segregated parts of the city. As the new government of South Africa continues to address the manifold needs of its population, these national landmarks operate on the national imaginary, commemorating the struggle for freedom and establishing the civic spaces of the new democracy.

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