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“Unity in Diversity”. The Built Environment

“If we look into the future [of South Africa], is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races co-mingle and produce a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen?” – MK Gandhi

Current debates around our built environment concerns raise questions about whether our present built environment suitably supports the human rights aims of our Constitution, as well as our economic needs and opportunities. We all agree that we build spaces so that we can function in these spaces effectively. We recognise that our houses, neighbourhoods, towns and cities are like tools, that we use to attend to our living needs. We also agree that the spaces that we build, often if not always, attempt to acquire a particular desired aesthetic appearance, which is an expression of our individual and collective inspirations and aspirations.

With the above in mind it becomes evident that the built space aims to support our lifestyles and the needs thereof and that it is also an expression of who we are i.e. our identities. This article aims to discuss how the changes in the South African building culture's discourse culminate in built environment practices that attempt to support and represent a culturally adequate spatial structure and expression of our society. Further, how can cultural adequacy spatially

advance the lifestyles of those previously marginalized in our society by stimulating entrepreneurial growth opportunities, pervasive within their cultural capital/s. Such entrepreneurial growth if correctly managed can naturally equate to an economic growth from which we can all benefit.

At the 2008 South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) Biennial Convention, the theme of the convention was adopted as an ongoing process towards developing a legacy for South Africa's future generations. The theme, “A Sustainable, Humane and Inclusionary Built Environment (SHIBE)”, highlights these three aspects as key principles towards a built environment that can harness the longevity of all living species by upholding social values that strengthen relationships of people amongst themselves and their world.

This should not be confused with a Utopian ideal because SHIBE acknowledges conflict and difference as instruments that present opportunities for understanding and contesting ignorance.



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Evander, Mpumalanga province: Low-cost housing has replaced shacks and other temporary dwellings.

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Sustainable

This article will avoid reducing the current global discourse on sustainability into theoretical ventriloquism on energy efficiency, greening and recycling. Safe to say that concern around this subject has leap-frogged with such immense dynamism that it has, on the one hand, come as a welcome relief yet, on the other hand, fallen prey to rogue commercialization. Though the latter has often proven to be a catalyst for creating awareness, it has largely been at the expense of genuine practice and understanding of the matter at hand. Fortunately despite the unsavory aspects

surrounding sustainable industries, South Africa now accepts that RDP settlements are not only an environmental scourge but that they are unsustainable because they provide no social or infrastructural framework to ensure that end users are able to maintain and develop their homes, settlements and the natural environment. South Africa has come to realize that RDP settlements will develop into future dilapidated or slum settlements unless these settlements are remodeled to incorporate the necessary amenities and infrastructure to make them stimulate economic activity and a dignified lifestyle.

Current thinking and shifts in the implementation of housing by the Department of Human Settlements (DHS) is to ensure that housing programmes are accompanied by urban infrastructure that would afford end-users environments conducive for socio-economic development. What we hope is that these programmes will entail, amongst others, the simple provision of, at the very least, a single main arterial route where mixed-use activities such as commercial, retail, education, training, health, entertainment, recreation, worship, burial and other public assembling indoor and /or outdoor spaces can take place. Added to such a route/s should be urban nodes with scaled down mixed-use spaces for convenient related activities and amenities within short walking distance.

These urban nodes need not duplicate or replicate each other but can offer a range of permutations of mixed-use activities and amenities proportioned and related to the immediate neighbourhood/s that make up the overall human settlement. Aside from the fact that these urban nodes need to be strategically located within the settlement, they also need to be effectively linked by secondary arterial routes that gravitate to and disperse from the main arterial route/s. Complementing these secondary routes are a network of general streets as well as pedestrian and cycling paths which are prioritized only for residential use to allow calm and distance from the urban nodes.

The main arterial route/s and urban nodes would allow those residents with the given recourses, skills and expertise, spaces from where they can exercise their skills and expertise whilst employing local settlement dwellers, thus also encouraging employment within the settlement. This will go along way to address the brain-drain commuting at high expense from their settlements to the city where they are employees instead of being employers or employees in their own settlements.

At the public scale, examples of how humaneness can be infringed ranges from bucket systems, as provisions for ablution facilities, to gated communities as solutions for safety and security havens.

None of the above is new urbanism or new settlements planning. Rather it is common sense spatial structure planning. Locally we witness these planning approaches applied in the development of human settlements that are inhabited by our privileged middle to high income communities. Surprisingly these planning approaches are abandoned in the creation and development of built environments for our lower income communities.

Humane

The principle of humaneness serves to meet as broad as possible the functional and spatial requirements which are conducive to supporting individuals, a family or community to function constructively, albeit with the challenges that are presented by socio-economic, political and/or natural events.

At the domestic scale it suffices to use the example of a one roomed RDP house that restricts an individual or his/her family into a resource-less enclosure where day and night activities compound into a clamour of cooking, eating, sleeping, studying, working, washing, entertaining, celebrating and even mourning. Perhaps most humiliating is when the intimacy of parents translates into an insidious act in the presence of their children as adult privacy is compromised by the limitations of these shelters. At the public scale, examples of how humaneness can be infringed ranges from bucket systems, as provisions for ablution facilities, to gated communities as solutions for safety and security havens.

Both these examples serve to illustrate the deprivation of individual and social dignity that communities can be subjected to when human settlement developments neglect to consider the “human” factor in human settlements. As humans we need to identify with intrinsic values that affirm our being through the expression and experience of our individual and or collective identities. Identity is the embodiment of our personal or shared values. These values can either be for the betterment or corrosion of the self or society depending on how the values are observed and practiced.

Humaneness is about the betterment of individual and social relationships through values such as, amongst others, dignity, hospitality, order and sharing. The spatial expressions of these four values have been identified through the philosophy of botho/ubuntu as part of ongoing research at MARU a PULA. This research investigates the spatial expression of intrinsic social values that promote social

cohesion and progress. Available documents and studies have afforded MARU a PULA to be able to develop built environment theories around these four values of humaneness. With time MARU a PULA will extend this research into other values of humanness such as those mentioned in the quote below.

It is said to reflect a deep-rooted African maxim; “A person is a person through other persons” – “Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu” – [“Motho ke motho ka batho”]. Those who have proposed “humaneness” as translation for ubuntu come close to its essence but, as this saying hints, there is much more to it’.

‘The Nguni concept ubuntu (and its Sotho equivalent botho) in essence describes an attitude, a way of life. Its richness in meaning creates all kinds of difficulties for those of us who would want it translated into any one of our European languages. It often evades definition but encourages one to savour intellectually its pith in human acts of respect, recognition, concern, compassion,

forgiveness, sincerity, generosity, hospitality, brotherhood, sisterhood, caring, sharing and many more such concepts depicting similar experiences. It is said to reflect a deep-rooted African maxim; “A person is a person through other persons” – “Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu” – [“Motho ke motho ka batho”]. Those who have proposed “humaneness” as translation for ubuntu come close to its essence but, as this saying hints, there is much more to it’. David Olivier, Faith and Earthkeeping. “Earthyear”; June – 1998

Where there are no documents or studies to assist, guide and inform the identification of the spatial expressions and applications of other values of humaneness such as, amongst others, those mentioned in the above quote, MARU a PULA will venture to create and, if necessary, invent such studies.

The purpose of researching these values through the philosophy of botho/ubuntu is to contextualize them in the African perspective and perceptions of the continent’s batho/ubuntu people whose spatial concepts, theories and practices of design and construction have been historically marginalized due to political ideological programmes of South Africa’s pre-’94 separatist rule. This marginalization permeated through every sphere of life from the doctrines of South Africa’s built environment learning academies, as well as the Institutes of the built environment fraternities, through to professional practice.

Unless our built environment is layered with these previously marginalized social values it will continue to serve to advantage and disadvantage the citizens of this country in accordance with the objectives of the pre-’94 separatist ideologies, which have today ingrained classist manifestations. It is through layering our separatist built environment with the social values of the spatial structuring concepts and applications of the previously marginalized cultures that South Africa’s built environment will transform into a true culturally adequate SHIBE that supports an equitable production, and which gains from South Africa’s diverse cultural capitals.

Inclusionary

This brings us to the question of the continued practice of islands of urbanization, which our South African society is redefining: what used to be on the one hand

white islands – cities, towns and suburbs, and on the other hand, black, Coloured and Indian islands – townships. Our society is redefining these islands from race based islands into ones ranging from islands of extreme poverty to islands of immeasurable wealth. The former are experienced as Khayelitsha-like slums whilst the latter as Dainfern-like golf estate gated suburbs.

Cosmo City north-west of Johannesburg is perhaps a first case attempt at inclusionary housing in South Africa as it brings together the aforementioned range of islands. Despite its well intended aims, Cosmo City’s failure is brought about by its precast panel walls erected between the classes just as the pre-1994 green belts and buffer strips separated the race based islands. As such Cosmo City maintains a class separatist concept and it effectively also advances the marginalization of black South Africans now that class has become synonymous with race.

True inclusionary human settlements need to centre around the co-existence of different classes and cultures in the same street as is the case in normative urban traditions. When Napoleon III briefed his notorious architect/urban designer, Haussman, to transform Paris from the sewer-filled slum city it was into what Napoleon termed “the most beautiful city in the world” Haussman developed mixed income mixed used six storey residential buildings. These are the earliest models whose idea of class inclusionary live (floors 1 to 6 residential) and work (ground floor commercial/retail) housing, continues to be successfully applied in the developed world and can serve as tangible precedents to guide our built environment transformations.

... I have learned to appreciate the significance and integral role played by society, government, teachers, and parents. They form what I like to call a sacred square, within which the learner may thrive.

The time has dawned upon us to stop practicing the so-called “housing” and (black) “township” models which were developed in the 1950’s to stunt social growth at a cognitive, material and spiritual level.

In a publication titled “*blank... Architecture, apartheid and after*”, we are presented with numerous case studies, which unpack the political intentions and practices, that saw to the creation of our racially segregated environment and in particular township housing. Derek Japha, one of the many authors in the book, demonstrates how township housing and planning was in the early 50’s a result of “*two modernisms*”: *the modernism of apartheid social engineering*, as was the practice of the then government and “*the modernism of the creation of subjects through science*”, as was the dominant global philosophical approach and trend in Architecture and Urban design.

With regard to the creation of subjects through science, Japha elaborates by referring to Paul Rabinow’s “*two archeological moments in modernist planning: techno-cosmopolitanism and middling modernism*”. According to Rabinow, these concepts “*shared the imperatives of industrialization and welfare*”, as Japha put it “*the project to regulate society through art and science*”.

Where techno-cosmopolitan modernism “*was tailored to the local context, middling modernism sought to create... New Men, purified and liberated to pursue the new forms of sociality that would inevitably arise from the creation of healthy spaces and forms*”. Through these concepts of modernism, Japha states that “*science would define humanity’s needs and technical planners would meet them.*”

In so far as the modernism of apartheid social engineering is concerned, Japha

identifies the awareness of the then Nationalist government's Eiselen, the Secretary of Native Affairs, and Verwoerd himself, *"that the implementation of apartheid depended on the development of a successful urban housing programme. As they put it, 'Orderly housing is a prerequisite of proper control, whereby vagrants and parasites who always flourish in slum conditions can be cut out. This scheme to house all workers under control, co-ordinated with the control of influx, which must be made effective by means of the labour bureau ... will radically improve the conditions of the Native populations of the towns'".*

Japha's paper exposes how the philosophical approach of Rabinow's modernisms in professions such as Architecture and Urban Design were sincere aims to appropriately home the *"natives"*, but instead these earnest intentions were crudely manipulated by the government of the time.

Aside post-'94 private sector alterations and extensions to South African townships, their 50s footprint and the dwellings of the time bear testimony to this crude manipulation, which was achieved by the applications detailed in the 1951 government's *"Minimum Standards of Accommodation for Non Europeans"* document.

These are aspects and issues professionals such as Dr Xolela Mangcu tackles when he speaks of South Africa's built environment as being a product with little if no input from previously marginalised

communities in the make up and definition of this built environment. Another expert in the field, Steven Robins, goes so far as to speak of "White Space" or "White Cities", questioning why it is our South African cultural diversity is not reflected in our built environment.

As previously mentioned at the opening of this article, there are progressive shifts in built environment discourse and our political sphere that recognize the wealth of resource still dormant in the hearts, minds and hands of previously marginalised societies. These shifts assert that the future of our success as a country also depends on their concepts of sustainability as defined in their social value systems and cultural practices.

What is sorely needed is for the current and future South African governments to aggressively invest in researching practical methods of re-appropriating our separatist built environment into a unified and diverse built environment where the multitude of cultural capital and knowledge systems of a diverse society can collectively define a truly cosmo-african, afro-politan South African built environment. Whilst social engineering through space planning does present challenges of political indoctrination and subordination of a government over its citizens perhaps there is a level of built environment social re-engineering that needs to be applied in South Africa and the continent to undo colonial and pre-'94 ideological practices.

NOTES

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