



MEMORIES, TEXTS AND COLLAGES

Franco Frescura



An old Italian proverb, often used by Italo Calvino, states that “A city without old buildings is like an old man without memories”. Buildings, regardless of their style or aesthetic or function, form an important element in our memories of time and place. Design might not have the power to change people’s lives for the better, but bad design most certainly has the ability of creating living hells for them to inhabit.

Architects generally use the word “modernism” to describe a period in architectural history from 900 onwards which saw the introduction of new materials, such as steel, reinforced concrete and glass, and their structural use in a manner which swept away the decorative styles of previous classical eras. The movement was heavily influenced by the geographical and climatic predeterminism of the 1920s and 1930s, and although many “modern” architects claimed alliance to local values, this regionalism was generally limited to small environmental adaptations and the use of solar control devices, such as screens and natural ventilation devices.

Modern Architecture was generally viewed as “revolutionary” for a number of reasons. Not only did it broadly sweep away a language of construction with unbroken links to Pharaonic Egypt and Babylon, but it was also identified with social change of a socialist nature. It is significant that one of the first actions of the Nazi party, when it came to power in 1933, was to close down the Bauhaus, and thereafter no pleadings by that ultimate of architectural prostitutes, Mies van der Rohe, could change their minds on this point. Modern architectural historians also generally ignore the fact that the Modern Movement promoted social engineering as a vehicle towards the achievement of a Utopian political state. In the belief that “good design” could change and uplift humanity, Corbusier once proclaimed, “It’s Architecture or revolution.” It is no coincidence therefore that a number of 20th century totalitarian regimes adopted Modern Movement architecture as a strategy towards the suppression of ethnic minorities and the creation of a faceless centralised government.

They have been assisted in these efforts by architects themselves who,

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oblivious to the more self-evident changes in post-modernist thinking, have continued, during this past century, to strip their work of any ideological symbolism. It is fair to say that, today, architecture remains firmly embedded in a structuralism derived from historical styles and typologies, and that most architectural texts published are still phenomenological and descriptive in nature. Critical analysis, it seems, has swept by us, and remains the tool of effete academics and sad little beings that are incapable of performing the virile world of structural erections.

Architecture did have a brief dalliance, it is true, in the field of post-modernism, but there the symbolic became the metaphor, the structural became an ironic reference, and its focus upon the use of classical elements was aesthetic rather than functional. There is also a deep-seated, and probably substantiated, suspicion that the movement was heavily funded by the CIA in order to counter the worldwide presence of (Soviet) modernism, and to create an architecture more in line with Reagan's concepts of democracy.

MEMORIES

An old Italian proverb, often used by Italo Calvino, states that "A city without old buildings is like an old man without memories." Although it is true that the architectural conservation movement in South Africa has been based upon romantic and sometimes even reactionary values, it is also valid to state that the landmarks of our urban landscapes are the common property of a people as a whole, regardless of who holds the title deeds. Thus, when yet another building is imploded in Johannesburg, as part of its programme of Sunday entertainment, the removal is nothing short of the vandalization of a large piece of our common consciousness. Buildings, regardless of their style or aesthetic or function, form an important element in our memories of time and place. Each one of us is the lead actor in the soap opera of our lives, and we look to buildings to provide us with a stage set within which we can act out the petty dramas of our humdrum existences. Imagine conducting your business transactions in the setting of the Roman Forum 2000 years ago; or attending worship in Notre Dame in Paris; or watching 10 000 Zulu braves parading before their King at Ondini. Imagine also being raised in the faceless uniformity of Soweto; negotiating the muggers and rapists of the Pruitt Igoe housing estate in St Louis, USA; or trying to find your way home in one of the post-1950 prefabricated suburbs outside Moscow. Design might not have the power to change people's lives for the better, but bad design most certainly has the ability of creating living hells for them to inhabit.

Depending upon who is writing the history, buildings have the power to become symbols of the power and the privilege of a ruling elite; the oppression and subjugation of an enslaved labour force; or the technological and aesthetic attainments of a people. Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and the Reichs Chancellery in Berlin, were both the product of slave labour. Yet the one remains the cherished symbol of religious fervour, while the other was torn down as the hated symbol of a totalitarian system. Terragin's Casa del Fascio in Como was proclaimed in 1936 as a symbol of the attainments of Italian Fascism, yet little less than 10 years later the Italian Communist Party had no compunction in moving their offices into the building. Architectural history is full of similar anachronisms, which means, therefore, that not only are our memories selective, but that they can be opportunistic, and can be manipulated to the advantage of current events.

I recently adjudicated a case in Johannesburg where the Province was proposing to demolish eleven city landmarks in order to create a meeting place for unionist rallies. At least four of these buildings had been created by important politically progressive white architects. The project architect, himself black, gay and with impeccable ANC family links, also wanted to demolish a hotel which had been an important gathering place for left-wing unionists and gay activists, while retaining elements of Volkskas Bank, one of the keystones and symbols of the Apartheid economy. There is no doubt that he swept aside these contradictions by imposing his own layer of overriding ideology as he later claimed that his proposals were intrinsically African, as he was an African and that therefore, by definition, anything he proposed must also be African.

However, the ideological shortcomings of a theory-bankrupt discipline are nowhere better exposed than by one of the main proponents of the Modern Movement in North America. Having spent at least four years saluting his Fuhrer and kowtowing to Goering, Mies van der Rohe eventually realised that his efforts at having the Modern Movement recognised as the official architecture of a virile Nazi state had come to nought, and in April 1938, he finally left Germany for the USA. Ironically, it was there in that most democratic of nations that his efforts to peddle totalitarian and faceless aesthetics finally bore fruit and the Americans showered him with academic honours and architectural commissions.

IDEOLOGICAL MEMORIES

The effect of ideology upon the built environment is perhaps nowhere more evident than upon the urban landscape. Many Dutch towns in South Africa sprang up with the sole purpose of providing the farming community of a region with a place to meet four times a year to hold

nagmaal or communion. As a result, the “nagmaal plein”, the large area before the Great Church where farmers could outspan their wagons, came to dominate the local Dutch urban landscape, and became the symbol of a Dutch settlement. The English, on the other hand, were more pragmatic and, when Lord Charles Somerset established Somerset East, his surveyors located two churches, the English and the Dutch at opposite ends of the settlement while placing the Government buildings at the symbolic centre of the plan. Dutch settlements did however show a marked preference for the pragmatic flat landscape, while the British had an eye for the picturesque opportunities presented by sloping ground.

However, the presence of ideology is nowhere more marked than in the implementation of Apartheid City Planning after 1948. It is true that the presence of segregated planning had already become evident during the colonial era, but this was not driven by ideology, was implemented on an ad-hoc basis, and was subject to considerations of class divisions and health provisions. Nor was this uniformly implemented. In Port Elizabeth, for example, the captains of industry followed an integrated approach to town planning which would keep their workers, white and black, closest to their places of work. The merchant classes, on the other hand, advocated the removal of black suburbs to the outskirts of “white” settlement. This argument was eventually won by the “health” lobby after the introduction of bubonic plague on the subcontinent from Argentina in 1903, and virtually overnight, all of the major towns in southern Africa became segregated. Even so, during the 1920s in both Johannesburg and Cape Town, the white residential areas were integrated to a far greater degree than Apartheid-era historians would lead us to believe.

The introduction of Apartheid planning after 1948 codified the racial divisions of the Colonial city, and created areas where white and black had to live under strictly segregated conditions. Individual migrant workers were allowed to live in “white” cities, but only under strict conditions of curfews, pass law enforcement or in sexually-segregated hostels. These regulations were enforced by a network of laws that curtailed contact across the colour line, such as the notorious Immorality Act, the Liquor Act, the Gold Laws, and the enforced segregation of sport and social amenities.

One of the most significant features of Apartheid City Planning, indicative of the oppressive intent of its design, lay in the implementation of urban plans that focused each residential area onto a central open space which town planners coloured green, but in reality were centres for rapes, the disposal of stolen vehicles, the illegal brewing of liquor, and the dealing in drugs. The concept was widely touted by its designers as “Garden City Planning”, and the most recent advance in planning theory. In practice, it was the intention of the State to locate Police Sub-stations upon each hub

where nests of submachine guns could control the network of radiating streets. Black suburbs were usually subjected to one-entrance-one-exit planning, which allowed police to move in at any given time, usually on a Friday night, and isolate the residents for as long as it was deemed desirable. Soweto, which by the 1970s counted over two million residents, had three such entrances. The location of black suburbs at a location distant from the main centres of employment also reinforced the “company store” relationship between them and the CBD while allowing the State to establish monopolies over means of transport. The meandering nature of black suburban streets also did not allow for the development of an internal commercial and manufacturing infrastructure while police demolition squads ensured that no illegal improvements could be made to state-owned houses. Under Apartheid, doctors and lawyers were forced to live under the same squalid conditions as labourers and indigent families, and although some streets did have names, in general residences were only identified by means of a generic number and suburb name. There is no doubt that the ensuing facelessness was the direct and deliberate outcome of State-directed planning policy.

INDUCED MEMORIES

The creation of “new” memories is the time-honoured practice of governments, whether this be in Egyptian times, when Rameses II embarked on a massive programme of rewriting the history of public works; or Hadrian attaching Agrippa’s porch onto his Pantheon; or Mussolini’s planners driving in Hausmann style the Via della Conciliazione from Castel San Angelo through to St Peter’s in Rome; or their “cleaning up” of ancient Roman buildings to reflect a new imperial reality. Today we blindly accept that contrary to common sense and the historical record, Christians were martyred in the Colosseum and that women stayed at home while their menfolk built cathedrals.

In about 1982, the newly-nascent Apartheid state of Ciskei embarked upon a programme of deliberately inventing a political identity which would cast legitimacy upon its “independent” status. Consequently it went through a process of establishing a “shrine of the nation”; of “discovering” Royal remains on Robben Island and, after a short sea voyage and a long state funeral, re-interring these on the site of the shrine; of establishing its own airline and international airport to north European standards, complete with two snow ploughs; and of building for itself a new administrative capital.

The outcome was Bisho, located some 7 km outside King William’s Town. The planners, in their wisdom, wrote into the building byelaws that any construction in Bisho should be in a Post-Modernist style, the then-

prevailing architectural aesthetic in vogue. The result was the world's first, and only, post-modernist city, complete with giant rusticated columns, leopard gargoyles, African mask bollards and a CBD arising starkly out of the South African veldt without the benefit of a surrounding residential context.

There is no doubt that its planners intended to promote an image of Bisho that was, simultaneously, modern, African and regionalist in nature. In reality, they created an environment that was as unwanted as it was unloved, and which became the habitat of scavenging goats within 30 minutes of the departure of state bureaucrats.

AMNESIAS

Much as collective memory is subject to reinvented memories, new memories and false memories, it is also subject to silences or amnesia. The pragmatic reinterpretation of old symbols and their recycling to meet new ideological uses is perhaps most noticeable in societies where a need for economic development and peace override the hurts and prejudices of previous eras. In South Africa, a need to find common ground between an (inherently conservative) ANC and reactionary Afrikaners has led to both sides discovering a shared dislike of intellectuals, immigrants and minority groups. The victim in this process has been the historical truth, beginning with a Truth Commission that set out to reinforce the concept that armed resistance was external and only began in the 1980s, through to the adoption of conservative planning and housing practices. The result has been a series of museums which tell a selective “truth”, to the creation of endless memorials now called monuments, to the adoption of buildings and spaces of the old order to meet the pragmatic needs of the new.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the Apartheid City of the past continues to expand relentlessly, the facelessness of past housing has now been harnessed to the needs of “economic” shelter, demolitions of old historic structures continue but in the name of redressing the colonial legacy, and streets named after the architects of Apartheid still live as tributes to our new partners in democracy. Thus, while the previously-white suburbs continue a slow process of demographic integration, no similar counter movement is perceivable in previously black areas. Indeed, the objectives of Apartheid Architects and planners, to create an underclass that is perennially poor and exclusively black continue unchecked to the present day. Verwoerd would have liked the New South Afrika.

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