

Johannesburg : Landscapes of Desire

An investigation into Johannesburg for the Biennale di Venezia 2000
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Cities make visible the enactment of human desire on the landscape. The urban landscape of Johannesburg clearly reflects the agendas of colonial opportunism and racial segregation aimed at the extraction of its hidden wealth.

Superscribed over the colonial landscape, apartheid planning fixed the physical separation of communities through the entrenchment of cultural and racial difference. Johannesburg has been planned to be dysfunctional. It is an abnormal city in a malformed society.

The fear of violent crime, the inherited prejudice of apartheid and misplaced Western ethics perpetuate the polarisation into different hothouses, each breeding their own specific rules for survival. Between the City of Death and the City of Superfluity, the contemporary landscape is shaped between extremes of ambitions and realities.

We are now released into the chaos of reinvention - our city on the knife-edge. How can we be visionary at this time, in this place? History for us is not a positive reference. History does not bequeath us the 'objet trouvé' that would guide our ethics and our actions.

The engineering of separation is exposed through a series of abrupt changes in landscape, which delineate zones of homogenous culture, economy, race and density. In each zone specific marks have been made on the original Highveld savannah resulting in a set of such clearly individual conditions, that life within is governed by very different rules and codes of conduct. In a fragmented city, ethics are not constant or universal, they vary from culture to culture, person to person.

In Johannesburg the gaze of the observer is offended: the judgement is extreme. If we suspend the baggage of history, we will be allowed to see clearly: the fierce beauty and immense potential of a damaged city reveals itself in the 'clarity' of its diverse landscapes. Crude as well as fragile structures exist in which people satisfy basic human needs. Herein lies the untapped potential which holds the promise for the future. For the moment, the city as it exists is treated as a cadaver being scavenged by all.

In Johannesburg, the role of the Keepers of the City (including architects) can embrace the responsibility of mediating, combining and exploiting the forces acting on the city by building on the positive features of our landscape and allowing basic human desires to be enacted in a dignified manner. In a city of discrimination, access to urban amenity becomes the site of struggle.

Healing Practices: Exploiting the Space Between

A record of interventions for Johannesburg and the Biennale di Venezia 2000
by Paragon Architects, Johannesburg, South Africa.

The spaces for a practice of activating the city through amenity are not self-evident, but are located between the extreme agendas of the participators in urban life. In the new-found space of practice, the tools and techniques of (architectural) production can be assessed critically and activated with maximum effect.

Our city draws its life from the extreme concentrations of energy and exchange at the pulse points of movement, against the slow death of deficiency of urban amenity. The ubiquitous minibus taxi is and represents all the failure and liability of the old, with the chaotic and forceful reassertion of the new order of society. The project presented here, a prototype taxi promotion and information booth, is made as a folly between the opportunity of commercial exploitation and the necessity for basic amenity. It is specific in its intervention, but posits general questions about the opportunity for developing an ethics of practice in our context. It is a work of architecture located in a context of extremes. It is an investigation into realities and possibilities of practicing in a space of contrasts: healing deficiency by exploiting the space between.

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