

## Public Space? In Johannesburg?

The life of cities occurs in public space. People activate public space in order to live the choices city life offers, and to project their identity and their desires into and onto a landscape that is a given and a constant.

Importantly, the soul and spirit of a city are defined by the quality and nature of its public spaces. In a globalizing world, use of public space is changing.

Johannesburg simultaneously mirrors these global trends and yet grapples with the legacy of its recent social and political history. Public space in Johannesburg is hotly contested and is the most visible and real reflection of changes in our city in the recent past.

Johannesburg is defined by a number of qualities, one of these being its ability and willingness to rush headlong into the future. At only 117 years of age, it is too young to be precious about itself, or about where it is going. Its psyche, shaped by its history of gold, is centered on exploitation and convenient reinvention.

It is hardly a city known for the quality of its public spaces: it has simply not been designed around them. It has always been a city of corporate showmanship, and even its civic architecture is at best part of a street, hardly ever part of a popular urban space. Beyond the city and its monuments lie vast stretches of intensely private suburbs with free-standing houses; be they villas of the rich or the township housing of the poor. In an exploitative and private city such as Johannesburg, what is public space? I believe that we are only beginning to understand that public space has to do with the real experience of ownership and power.

Ten years into a democratic order, we are still struggling to understand the impact of being citizens of one nation, let alone being equal citizens of one city. If public space has to absorb the everyday and functional, but more importantly the symbolic needs of city life, what does our relationship to public space say about us as a society?

Ten years ago, Johannesburg was released into a chaos of freedom. With the end of apartheid's spatial ordering system, the city became, more than ever, a landscape to be exploited by all. In the power vacuum between political orders, management of the city deteriorated. The resulting free space allowed mercenary operators to occupy and colonize the few public spaces the city had: taxi ranks and shopping centers replaced open space, and we lost the safety of the streets. Security paranoia caused walls to rise and houses to turn in on themselves. We have bartered our communal obligation to be responsible for the safety of the public realm, for a private security contract with armed response guards.

Are there projects which challenge this dominant trend? I believe they are only just beginning to be formed. And they will have to reverse a way of life we, as citizens of this city, have come to accept all too readily.

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.

Where public space becomes a free-for-all, its usefulness declines. For a while, we believed that freedom in itself was worthy of expression in the city. We celebrated the new structures, textures, vibrancy, visual chaos, and pure efficiency and inventiveness of the takeover of public space in the newfound freedom of our cities. But we forgot that successful public space depends on a social contract between city and individual.

Coming from a culture of separation and discrimination in space, we have learnt our lessons fast as our young city changed in true Johannesburg style. We have gone from a discriminatory city to a chaotic city that began to fail at every level. Now we are heading in the right direction, I believe, and new projects such as the Kliptown Renewal Project show the way.

Why? Because this project has a genuine aim at a better life for all users of the city as its basis. This project represents a negotiated solution to the conflicting claims on land and its uses. This is a solution aimed at empowering ordinary people to be proud and active players in their life and in the life of the community. This project provides genuinely useful spaces that serve day-to-day functions before it serves the representative needs of politicians and city officials. This project carries with it programmes of learning and skills transfer. Here, people benefit not from spaces, but from being involved in the process of creation of spaces.

And, last but not least, here is a group of architecturally ambitious projects that do simple things with limited means. Remember, Johannesburg is a city that is only just developing a respect for history and a memory of its own. This project shows how we can, in our own hurried way, take some of the best lessons from greater and more accomplished cities, and apply them to the benefit of ordinary people. And celebrate not consensus, but difference acted out with respect for others. That is a powerful driver for successful Public Space.