As young imaginers of space in South Africa in 2011, we must question what it means to be a part of the post-colonial condition of our society. In South Africa, we face the challenge of trying to stitch together a society so fragmented by the legacy of Apartheid. Cities such as Cape Town seem hauntingly and irreversibly stamped with the colonial landscape of privilege and exclusion. The formal European cityscape that remains is at odds with the daily lives that weave through in a constant state of transformation. The question for architects is how we may design appropriately in the space of transformation and hybridity, trying to find the answers amongst the many complex identities and histories of a traumatised continent.

To begin to situate South African cities in the post-colonial urban discourse, it is necessary to learn from established and thriving post-colonial African cities such as Kinshasa and Lagos. At once, the most striking aspect about these cities is how they shatter our image of the city as the European model of city. Lagos, as seen through the lenses of Rem Koolhaas in his documentary ‘Lagos Wide and Close’, is an organism of unimagined scale and proportion, a throbbing tide of millions of people, teeming in self-organised networks for survival. This city does not impart an image of tree-lined avenues and grandiose Victorian villas, nor the dense dwellings of its millions. What we are left with is an image of sprawling people – people and movement; people and trade; people and resourcefulness. The true African city exists as the evolution of the informal through and around the colonial city. It is the continual appropriation and reclamation of space that defines urban patterns and keeps these cities in a constant state of renewal. This state of city-in-transition can only hint at a truly sustainable city – the city of the future – because any society with its changing ideals and networks can only be satisfied by flexible habitat. This sustainability is shown time and again in ‘Lagos Wide and Close’ when we are shown scenes of resourceful humans organising themselves into teams of production who fill gaps in the city, such as the men who recycle scrap metal drums in the dead spaces of the old colonial city, such as under its freeways.

In Lagos, as in Kinshasa, the informal economy has surpassed the formal economy and here we see the informal shifting the economy of the city from a consumer economy to that of producer. Koolhaas chooses Lagos amongst other cities of rapid population explosion to study because its overwhelming informal economy renders the city “almost disconnected from the global system.” Koolhaas, coming from an urban
experience of formal European cities, discusses the possibilities of an ‘organised future’ for the city: “I don’t think you can be in Lagos without becoming aware of its potency; when Lagos gets itself organised it will be extremely powerful; and already – without organisation – it is very powerful.”¹ What we see, however, is really an organised city, in the self-organised informal. The networks of people in motion do not rely on government planning to solve their problems. The people of Lagos control their own fate and make a place for themselves in the chaos through identifying any need they can fulfil.

The same reclamation of urban space through the informal is seen in the post-colonial city of Kinshasa. Filip de Boeck and Marie-Francoise Plissart describe this condition they call ‘post-urbanism’ in ‘Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City’. Kinshasa was previously a city on the margins of the colonial capital city of Leopoldville, but has since engulfed the logic of the colonial city as society inscribes its multiple ethnic identities and dynamics spatially. In Kinshasa, a process of informal ‘villagisation’ is creating the post-colonial condition of urban agrarianism. The city’s urban space draws lessons from the rural, as inhabitants adopt traditional tribal identities and organise themselves according to traditional hierarchies. The urban youth of Kinshasa draw from the collective imagination, using images such as “hunter and gatherer” as urban identities based on success and dominance within the networks they command. There exist a set of transcultural identities in this ruralisation of the city, which is also a space of ‘reterritorialisation’. Perhaps the most extreme and bizarre signifier of this hybridity is the phenomenon of ‘Billism’. Cinemas showing Hollywood westerns became the favourite meeting place of Leopoldville’s youth in the late 50s. Kinois male youth adopted the cowboy personas of their western role models and formed into gangs of urban terrorists who roamed the margins of the colonial city. They organised themselves into a social hierarchy based on cowboy authority, such as sheriffs who made the law and offered protection to the community in return for tax. The Billist movement exemplifies the sort clash between western and traditional ideals which negotiate hybrid identities in the post-colonial city, establishing self-governed networks of control which begin to organise society. As observers of this reimagining of urban practice, we need to update our vocabulary of analysis to be able to describe these new hybrid conditions. The social and architectural typologies of the colonial are becoming obsolete in these cases of urban African reterritorialisation.

The success of the margins to engulf and transform cities left behind after independence is a clear sign of the increasing failures of modern capitalism as left behind by the colonialists. This future of capitalist failure at the margins was predicted by the Henri Lefebvre, a committed Marxist social theorist (most active from the 1950s through the 1970s) who was concerned with daily life in a capitalist-governed world. Lefebvre gave the world its first critique of space in his seminal work ‘The Production of Space’ in 1974. His defining principle is that space itself, like other commodities, is actively produced by society. He refers to society as

¹ Koolhaas Lagos Wide & Close
the ‘mode of production’, which produces its own space. Hence, the capitalist mode of production produces capitalist space, which he describes as colonised, commodified, exchanged, and speculated over; and full of the contradictions inherent to capitalism\(^2\). Lefebvre uses the method of a ‘spatial triad’ to interrogate the dynamics at play in space. The first ‘moment’ of space is ‘representations of space’, the ideal space conceived of by professionals such as architects. This is a space of abstraction tied to society and its power, ideology and knowledge relations. In the colonies, it was the monumental buildings such as forts, city halls, monuments and palatial residences that imprinted imperial power through ideal space in the newfound territories. This colonial appropriation of traditional land stripped local peoples of their sense of orientation and identification in their environs. The forced loss of traditional systems of governance and hierarchy gave the colonisers the power to possess space and command society through concretising social divisions. This is the colonial landscape of exclusion.

The space of the transformational post-colonial African city then exists most strongly in its lived space, or ‘spaces of representation’. This is the lived, everyday space of the ‘users’ or ‘inhabitants’ of space (labels which he deems to be “clumsy and pejorative”). Unlike the abstractions of ideal space, spaces of representation denote concrete experience, appropriated and dominated by people in lived reality. Spaces of representation are linked to the ‘underground’ side of life, where transgression from rules and conformity takes place. The evolution of the informal (underground) and the self-organised spread of the margins into the city is a transgression from the ideal space of the colonial city. The ideal space of European dominance over Africans is therefore reversed in lived reality after independence. SPACES OF DIFFERENCE

“...self-organisation is inscribed upon an organised model of the city. There’s a weird interdependence between the planned and the unplanned. It’s actually an extreme form of modernisation, not some kind of African model”\(^3\)

Bringing the discussion home, we can look at Johannesburg as a prosperous global African city with a growing informal economy and a volatile mix of urban identities. Johannesburg is quickly finding its own hybrid language in the post-colonial only two decades after the fall of Apartheid, which must be seen as a colonial legacy. In many ways the European city is more formally ‘organised’ because of this prolonged colonial legacy and it is unclear to what degree the informal will change the city fabric compared to the extreme shifts in Lagos and Kinshasa. One could imagine that these cities started off in a similar situation to Johannesburg today – the white exodus from the CBD draining wealth, a lack of established black institutions and order and essentially a skeleton framework for reinterpretation and repossession of the city by those

\(^2\) Merrifield, A. p.107-8

\(^3\) Koolhaas Lagos Wide & Close
previously marginalised. With an influx of African immigrants and local black arrivals, the city has witnessed a boom in the informal economy. Intensive networking and information exchange are the fuel for entrepreneurial success. In the gaps left by the money exodus from the city, its new inhabitants have seized the opportunity to generate their own trading systems in this urban uncertainty. The same problem of outdated urban vocabulary emerges when we try to describe the various adaptations of traditional urban spaces. A need for various new household forms has emerged as the inner-city’s economy is increasingly based on the transience of international clientele. Hotels have adapted their services and rates to accommodate the demand for flexible short-term stays and apartment landlords capitalise on short-term occupancy rates. Established institutions and businesses are not equipped to handle the rapidly changing nature of the demand and urban frameworks must play catch-up to a transformational society. The transient nature of the African city’s society may offer the world a model for a sustainable city. In the messy conflicts and contradiction that exists in the hustle to sustain employment, shelter and well-being for these city-dwellers, there exist “functional spurts of change and growth” . While the standard of living in Johannesburg inner-city is nothing to romanticise, the adaptability of the city’s networks do seem to offer alternative avenues capable of making change and bridging the disparities of a wealth-divided society.

The discussion on African urbanity in the port-colonial era must now turn to the issue of making buildings in the post-Apartheid urban framework. The architecture of Apartheid was one of segregation and marginalisation which, along with political legislation and propaganda, constructed an undeniable social hierarchy. The success of the ideology to maintain its power lies in its systematic and thorough spatialisation on all scales, from the city, to the street, and in the mind of its subjects. The marginalisation of the ‘other’ in South Africa was practiced as a heterotopic space. Those who posed a threat to the regime’s power were banned or exiled from the country, distancing them through time and space. The Group Areas Act of 1966 was one of many laws legitimising the exercise of spatial segregation, which left its mark on cities spliced by colour. The heterotopias of segregation are the spaces outside of the real space of white South Africans. The real space of the black population was heavily restricted and contained by the police force. South African towns continue to exist with a syndrome of “double landscape” – the white town with its adjacent parasitic black town – as discussed by Lisa Findley in her book ‘Building change: Architecture, politics and Cultural Agency’. The role of architects today then must be to bridge the disparities and redistribute power through society by allowing multiple readings of spaces accessible to all. Findley powerfully describes the role of architects as “imaginative producers of culture, [who] participate actively and constructively in the

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4 Simone, A. Blank 8D

5 Simone, A. Blank 8D
reallocation of cultural agency and power. It is up to architects to question the patronage of their projects, to make sure that those intentions mirror their own values for society.

I have chosen to study the Red Location Museum of Struggle (1998-2005) by Noero Wolff as an example of post-colonial architecture in South Africa, having visited it and experienced the space it has produced. The project to commemorate the struggle through Apartheid is located in New Brighton, the oldest shack settlement in Port Elizabeth and a site of active resistance during the oppressive regime. The first sign of the progressive nature of the project is that it is unconventionally located in a township and not in the colonial city centre where a national museum would historically have been built. Noero Wolff decided to represent their view of the non-linearity of history here as a set of memories, “consciously disconnected yet bound together by themes” The exhibition space therefore takes the form of ‘memory boxes’, which are spaces of reflection which take inspiration from the memory boxes used by black migrant workers. These boxes are internalised exhibits, perhaps a reference to the retreating of township residents into their homes for security, where the law did not protect them on the streets outside. The saw-tooth factory profile of the building draws from trade union resistance posters, paying homage to the important role of Trade Unions in achieving freedom. This is another reference to the artefact or artwork as memory. The museum is intended to be a framework in the neighbourhood against which people can act out their lives. For example, the east facade is a habitable wall and the extensive pergola-covered entrance area is a public square to be used freely. Another area intended for community ‘empowerment’ is the landscaped grass area to the west of the entrance, where films can be screened for the community on a large screen structure.

Red Location is an enquiry into the changes that typologies must undergo in order to be useful to society. The museum challenges the idea of a museum as a closed house for artefacts, where in fact it becomes a space for social interaction and upliftment for the whole area which continues to exist on the margins of PE. The Red Location precinct recalls the modernist spirit of building with a social program of greater upliftment, in its ambitions to break down the physical separation that continues unchanged in South African cities. The space of the museum is intended to allow spatial freedom to the people and subject matter that were previously denied the right to move through and act in space. There is no predetermined route through the exhibits and many of the spaces, both interior and exterior are designed as flexible spaces to be adjusted with future needs of the local people. The materiality of the Museum seeks to actively empower the township dwellers in that it assigns new dignity to materials such as corrugated iron sheeting and concrete prefab blocks, which are commonly associated with poverty.

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6 Findley 2005 p.xii
7 Deckler, T (2006) p.43
8 Noero, J The Everyday and the Extraordinary (2002)
My impression of the Red Location Museum is that its success lies in the public street space it proposes as part of the greater precinct. I struggle to look past the inappropriate programme of activities that the architects were tasked with – a museum, art gallery and theatre – situated in an impoverished shack settlement where more immediate building needs would be to provide crèches, clinics and internet cafes. The justification for the precinct is that it will give local people the opportunity to enjoy the future investment that these buildings will be catalyst for. This idealistic vision seems unlikely to bear fruit on the periphery of a city centre which is virtually dead, yet full of potential for renewed use by opportunist people. While the arrangement of the memory-box exhibits does allow visitor freedom of movement, the format of the boxes negates the space for expression. The architect has prescribed the format of curation and provides little space, except on the walls of the exhibition hall, for other artists or curators to complete the space. Where Red Location fails at this, the Court building at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg is successful. The architects of the Constitutional Court have left room in their design for artists to complete the space. They did not assume strict control of the final outcome of the space, but added to the democratising of the space by allowing some space for the informal to express itself. This, along with other devices which fragment the architectural language of power, allows people a sense of authorship of the Court space.

The memory-box of Red Location is, however; an interesting hybrid space which negotiates a traditional practice of remembering with the Eurocentric conception of a house of artefacts. The industrial aesthetic of the museum is also a hybrid of sorts, but the question of its appropriateness persists. It seems to me that the architect has romanticised the saw-tooth factory roof as an icon inhabitants can relate to and draw nostalgia from. The reality of this symbol is that it most likely represents for the young working class (children of the resistance generation) the daily hardships of labour away from home; standing tall amongst their dwellings as a reminder of this condition upon arriving home after a day of relentless work. Negative criticisms aside, I do believe this architectural project employs some successful post-colonial strategies. The use of building materials familiar to the shack settlement landscape does help the museum to speak the language of its context. Its informal materiality speaks of a break-away from a European monument-style museum aesthetic and locates an interest of the architect to draw from the building traditions of the immediate community. Noero is searching to bridge the third and first world split in South African cities by advocating the use of the same technologies in every context, regardless of the client’s economic status. In the same way the Karin Smuts House challenges society’s perceptions of marginal building technologies, Red Location seeks to dissolve the view that western formal architecture is superior to the resourceful building practice of the shack settlements. The pergola-covered entrance and eastern habitable facade of the museum really does add to the creation of intensive public street space in the area. The museum’s attitude towards the street is again a new approach to museum-building, especially in the context of South African cities, which have no
tradition of intensive public spaces allowing the mixing of communities. Noero’s design of the precinct leaves much room for informal appropriation of these outdoor square spaces, which – when the precinct is completed – are likely to bloom into spaces of informal trade and activity, both economic and social.

The challenge for us as architects is to situate ourselves in the post-colonial city and take a position on designing spaces which can accommodate a condition of continual transformation. Iain Low describes two approaches of architects towards post-Apartheid building – the stylised post-modern pastiche and genuine post-structural hybridity\textsuperscript{9}. There is much architects can learn from the lessons of the African city, from the ingenuity and resourcefulness of those who drive the informal economy, to the transcultural urban identities that have emerged. Perhaps the success of new public buildings lies in their ability to be assigned a hybrid identity like that of Kinshasa’s Billist boys. The post-colonial architectural project must provide an urban framework in which Lefebvre’s ‘spaces of difference’ can support society in organising itself.

\textsuperscript{9} Low, Iain. 2002. p34


Le Roux, Hannah. Hell/Whole: The Inversion of Constitution Hill. Art South Africa v2.4, June 2004

