

Spatial [re]imaginings? Contesting township 'development' post-apartheid

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In June this year, the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) held a two-day interdisciplinary symposium entitled 'The townships now'. This piece is an extract from a paper presented at the Symposium.¹

One of the critical issues raised in the Call for Papers for the WiSER Symposium was the question:

‘...are we looking at new urban forms and to what extent and how are they framed by historical structures?’²

The paper, written as a ‘think-piece’, sets out to begin a conversation around this question. By way of example, it presents three ‘moments’ of architectural and planning engagement around the notion of ‘township’. Structured using three images, it seeks to interrogate the idea of the allegorical image of the township: as a way of exploring how this was conceived, and how these images have circulated and been translated into built form. The history of reception of spatial images of the township, I shall argue, remains pervasive in the contemporary imagining of township space.

There is a growing area of research in Visual History Studies, which sets out to critically engage with the visual components of archives and to set out new methods of inquiry in areas such as art history, photography, painting and landscape interpretation. Increasingly these visual sources are being used in contemporary research in news ways to interrogate critical approaches to history.³ Whether these are histories of the experience of otherness or sources of information about social, political, gendered and racial exclusion, visual information is now being subject to new epistemological processes. No longer solely a critique of aesthetics or form, visibility is being repositioned and theorised through research into agency, authorship, subjectivity and through research into sites of production.

It is within this emerging work that the visual sources of space need to be interrogated. What is the visibility of spatiality? How do visual imaginings influence and affect spatial realities? How are these linked to disciplinary practice and agency?

Allegory / Symbolism

Working along these lines as a method for thinking about township space making practices, I have found it useful to distinguish between notions of the symbolic and the allegorical aspects of the spatial images under investigation. The idea of the allegorical image is used not so much as a ‘moral tale’ (although township imagination has obvious moral foundations), but rather in terms of Goethe’s useful distinction outlined below:

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept always remains bounded by the image, and is entirely to be kept and held in it, and to be expressed by it.

Symbolism [however] transforms the phenomenon into idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea always remains infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible.⁴

While critical thought necessitates that such an opposition operates in complex ways, and that the boundaries are rarely so clear in practice, there are some distinctions that I wish

to elaborate upon. The first relates to the prevalence in architectural thinking around notions of the symbolic. Symbolism is a concept employed variously along differing methodological and theoretical areas of thought in the visual disciplines and in analysis. Secondly, while in art and architectural history the idea of the symbol has been used as a means to unpack meaning beyond the image or object and to reveal this meaning in social, and less visible ways, the focus has been on what the image represents rather than what the image does per se. So in semiotic analysis and in post-structuralist thinking, representation has taken a central place in visual analysis. After Roland Barthes et al, semiotic methods and representation theory has become internalised in much visual criticism.⁵

Less attention has been paid to notions of the allegorical image, although mention is made to this by Walter Benjamin and Fredrick Jameson, where they explore how images fix meaning and in so doing reproduction of the image is confined and somehow static.⁶ It is in this static nature of the image that the distinction - between the symbolic and the allegoric - is useful when considering contemporary spatial practice and modes of spatial design in the township. What then is the connection between these images and how does this relate to questions of method in the spatial design disciplines?

The creation of buildings and urban spaces, despite the best efforts of critics of practice, persists in a manner that is largely non-reflexive or unselfconscious. Authorship is seldom theorised, and agency is never mentioned in the professional world of spatial design by architects and urban designers. Instead the process of spatial design is seen in a positive manner somehow capable of improving the quality of the built environment, “solving urban problems” with spatial “solutions”, and strangely detached from the most basic social questions of agency, race and identity. Consequently there are central assumptions around ‘design’ - the creation of the spatial imaginary - which pervade as a reified creative method.

Consciousness is relegated to the dated notions of ‘humanism’ in which values are identified and categorised into stable ‘design informants’.⁷ Through doing this - or thinking in this way - culture and identity become essentialised, domesticated and are easily translated into spatial forms, freeing the designer of any messy contact with points of contestation or tension within the built environment they envision. Designers use ‘models’ and ‘typologies’ which work in an allegorical way, setting up stereotypes and precedents, or categories. In the case of the township these allegories were extended to create spaces of inclusion and exclusion, or in the present in new heritage initiatives - what is seen or remembered and what isn’t.

Allegorical moment/image:1

Figure 1: *Frontispiece*: Photograph of a model of Native Township for 20 000 inhabitants. (Model by J Reekie and A. Jenks)⁸

The first image is from something I found in the University of Cape Town Library Store in 1997. At the time I was looking for material as part of the research that I was doing for the blank_ Architecture, apartheid and after Exhibition.⁹ I was looking for points of contact between the work of architects and planners and the spatial / political projects of the colonial and apartheid state. This was a process of literally searching through piles of often unsorted and discarded material in back rooms and store rooms of libraries and archives. In the dusty residue, somehow conveniently outside of the easily accessible

official records, I began to find some remnants of the historical archive on apartheid space making.

The image and the publication booklet in which I found it were part of a large section of the collections held at what was then UCT's Architecture Library that were seen as no longer of interest in the open shelves, and had been taken to storage.¹⁰ This act of selection (or omission in this case) raised a number of questions for me about the nature of the historical archive and scholarship within the spatial disciplines. Why would books and publications relating to key apartheid history be kept 'out of sight'? Was this a conscious act of selection or simply a careless lack of disciplinary self-consciousness? What did/ does this say about disciplinary method in the present?

The image is a photograph of a model for an architectural scheme which formed part of a 'collective thesis' by students of architecture in their final year at Wits University in the 1930s. Among the students who were to become big names in the local scene in architecture were Roy Kantorowich and Kurt Jonas who were part of a group of students studying under Rex Martienssen. The Group, subsequently called the Transvaal Group was to be central to the impetus that pioneered the reception of Corbusian modernism in the then Transvaal.¹¹

The image is interesting in a number of ways when considering an early 'moment' in the development of racialised township thinking. For a start it is a historical artefact, a record of the spatial imagining of architects engaged with the envisioning of township space. It represents (along with the perspective, plan, section and elevation) a primary method of spatial imagination undertaken by modernist planners and architects: the three-dimensional spatial model. As a visual source of spatial thinking it can be read or interpreted, historicised or contextualised, and problematised.

In exploring the background to this image it emerged as a contested image of planning thinking at the time. Derek Japha's seminal paper 'The Social Programme of the South African Modern Movement' explores the trajectory of the debates surrounding this image of space in which Kantorowich and Jonas subsequently reject Corbusian politics and the native housing planning model as previously envisioned.¹² Their contention, based on strong Marxist critique of the Corbusian plan, however, becomes marginal to the large scale adoption of spatial modernism by the apartheid state where modernist spatial planning - along with its central tenets of dividing the city into zones of use - became adopted as a large scale answer to the segregationalist policies of the day.

In this form, I suggest that the 'native township' plan is allegorical, with its recognisable components of planned space – the bounded settlement, designed around a racial ideal of 'cultural' homogeneity and 'modernisation' of the urban African, and comprising dormitory housing facilities. That the scheme was subsequently rejected by its authors appears to have been lost as it has entered the spatial record not so much as a symbol of modernist space making patterns but perhaps more so as an allegory of formal planning thinking.

Allegorical moment/image: 2

Figure 2: Three dimensional computer generated models for the Mandela's Yard Museum project, by Peter Rich Architects (in collaboration with the Heritage Agency) for the Alexandra Development Forum.¹³

My second image is of a current spatial model for Mandela's Yard in Alexandra by architect Peter Rich. The view that you see is a computer generated model – a present day visualisation technique much like the physical 'model' of the 'Native Township' - giving a bird's eye view of the intended spatial intervention in Alexandra. This is a form of abstraction to enable the envisioning of space around the idea of the (Native) yard – or outside room – as an urban typology present in Alexandra.¹⁴

Rich, much like his predecessors at the Wits School, is an architect engaging in what I imagine he would call a more or less leftist form of practice. Over the last twenty years, he has built up a name for himself in two areas: on the one hand as a 'community architect' and also as a scholar of the 'Ndebele' – a form of spatial ethnologist. Unlike his predecessors, Rich does not see a tension between his two interests, rather he sees them as complementary. To this end he approaches Alex with a conviction in the value of his understanding of what I shall loosely call 'black cultural space' and the 'black cultural spatial experience'. Using methods of documentation much like the anthropological ethnologist he refers to finding the following:

Alexandra's organically evolved architecture, moulded around a specific lifestyle and culture, shaped by the availability of materials and immediate necessity, offers much that can be learned from and applied to the design of our cities.¹⁵

Using this 'culture' lens, he is somehow able to invert and mix concepts of the rural and the urban, enabling him to see traditional or vernacular qualities in the township. In this way as an architect he finds a way to negotiate the difficult terrain of a 'community project' or in this case a 'community heritage project'.¹⁶ In a sense this academic knowledge lends a sense of certainty, or in Foucault's terms creates a stable 'object' of knowledge.

I had the opportunity recently to review this project closely when I was asked to be a discussant for the Emory /UWC Workshop in a session entitled Reconfiguring Public Space.¹⁷ Rich expands on the concepts behind the project in a paper entitled: *Heritage driving change*. That there might be a tension between this knowledge and lived experience does not enter his description of the process. It is as if the spatial model as seen here is somehow a translation of these observed experiences, and that the proposed community archive is a space where these experiences are given voice.

Rich starts the paper suggesting the following:

[under the heading]1 Physical context:

Rather than a 'township' in the conventional sense, Alexandra is a black urban settlement. Its townscape has been shaped by its development as a predominantly black residential area prior to the official apartheid era.¹⁸

Expanding on this argument (illustrated with his own photos of the space) and supported by research undertaken by the Wits History Workshop - that Alex is not a township but rather a 'hidden city' - sparked heated debate at the Workshop.¹⁹ Questions were asked about how this idea might be useful beyond simply understanding some aspects of the planning of the place. And surely the way in which Alex became a highly administered space was just as confident a continuation of the project of modernity as any other township space? Contentions around the conceptual underpinnings of the notion of the township were up for debate. Subsequently, and in support of these critiques, the Mail &

Guardian newspaper ran a story covering the contestation over the process of rehousing residents on the building site for the Mandela's Yard Museum.²⁰

Returning to the idea of allegorical image, I'd like to suggest that current developmental discourses in the city still draw on modes of practice that are generally committed to a form of (re)production of spatial ideas of the township. Although the sites of engagement may vary - township, inner city or suburb - the concepts that underpin these distinctions have yet to be disaggregated and repositioned in the current spatial imaginary.

Speaking in the same session, Edgar Pieterse suggested that we need to apply our minds 'building with ruins and dreams...' in SA's cities.²¹ Using Spivak's notion of crisis as an enabling moment, he works productively with the tensions that have emerged in urban development politics (or what he calls a 'blind spot' on the left).²² So, if we accept what has been suggested, that architectural thought has worked in a more or less stable fashion, its histories in colonial contexts are those of the reception of European ideas applied in more or less uncritical ways in the local context - allegories if you like of the western traditions, methodologically and theoretically grounded in Western thought. Then images such as Rich's begin to become disaggregated and enter into the spatial record rather as 'moments' or productions of the prevailing contemporary processes than as sites of design conviction.

Allegorical moment /image: 3

Figure 3: Exhibition panel from: *Ina yona imephu?* (do you have a map?) Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, 2002²³

My third image is from an exhibition entitled *Ina yona imephu?* (do you have a map?) which is part of the display at the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum near Somerset West. I have chosen this image as my third 'moment' in spatial thinking because it represents 'another side' of the spatial imaginary, a counterpoint in approach to understanding the lived space of the township.

For those of you who are not familiar with Lwandle, it is situated just off the N2 sandwiched between the towns of Somerset West and Gordon's Bay. Originally built as a hostel environment to accommodate migrant workers and having resisted its removal as a 'black spot' in the eighties, the space has since become more permanently settled and is surrounded by new developments.²⁴ Lwandle sits amidst what can only be described as a truly bizarre piece of post-apartheid space – as you approach the turn off on the N2 you cannot miss billboards advertising Heritage Park - the 'first fully secured town in South Africa', complete with a larger than life picture of George Hazeldene, the man whose dream lurks inside an elaborate perimeter fence; then across a newly established 'buffer zone' there is the recently developed Chris Nissen Park; and as you turn off the N2 on your right - in the old buffer zone - there is the informal settlement of Nomzamo, incorporating the prominent, curved wall ruins of a bizarre project for a pet cemetery.

The museum was established in 1999, initiated by Charmion Plummer and Bongani Mjijima. At the time the local authorities (under Brett Merdell and Engineers Liebenberg and Stander) were starting what was called the Hostels to Homes project and a dispute had arisen over the possible preservation of one unit - Hostel 33. The result, after much debate, was the establishment of a museum to the experience of Migrant Labour. Bongani Mjijima is a historian (at the time a masters student in the Dept of History at

UWC), and as curator he constituted a Board – which included local people, representatives from Somerset West, the local councils, and colleagues from the Department of History. He secured the lease of a disused hall, and gained the permission to preserve Hostel 33 as part of the museum. He very soon opened the Museum inviting ex-Lwandle resident Sandile Dikeni to speak at the opening.²⁵

The image that you see is part of a project of self-reflection that the Museum embarked upon about two years later, as a way of establishing the Museum as an archive of the landscape. Working in collaboration museum staff, academics and student curators combed the local repositories for records – in an attempt to find out more about the history of Lwandle.²⁶ But the exhibition was also undertaken with another idea in mind: as a way to begin to conceptualise the future of the museum. There were many questions: should there be a permanent collection? Would anyone fund it? Was there a tension between the concepts of a community museum and telling the story of the experiences of migrancy? Would the new institution be accepted, understood or appreciated by the people living in Lwandle?

However, late last year a new development process was initiated by the Cape Town Uni City. This was conceived of as a project to be undertaken at the urban level and the Urban Design Branch of the City of Cape Town was brought in to assist the Helderberg Local Authority. So, at last Lwandle was to receive the attention of specialised design professionals.

From the outset the improvements to Lwandle's urban space were conceptualised around working with the existing urban fabric of the migrant labour settlement and providing new public infrastructure for informal traders, taxi ranks and the like. The Museum property was identified as an area that needed greening and a parking area, and a budget was allocated to the site. Plans were drawn up and the initial scheme presented by the Urban design department purposed that the money be spent on the property to this end. What followed subsequently was a complete reworking of this scheme after discussion by the Lwandle Museum Board where I was asked (as a member of the Board and in my professional capacity as an architect) to liaise with the City in this regard.

I found myself in the uncomfortable space of interlocutor between the City authorities and the Museum. This position was one in which the instability of relations between City authorities and communities became apparent and within which I had to work. Using my specialist knowledge was a way of representing the Museum's interests to the urban designers, I could literally begin a debate around the form of the envisioned project – in both drawings and through verbal communication. I began a process of designing the space according to my own understanding of the Museum's needs and its role within the broader community, which was presented to the Museum Board and later to the Urban design Branch, as a way in which to intervene with the scheme as presented. What emerged was, that when contrasted, the imaginings of the spatial design professionals and the experiences of residents presented very different perceptions of 'township development' needs.

On very practical levels, I raised concerns about the investment in a dedicated parking lot when there was an existing parking area in an adjacent parcel of land belonging to the municipality; expressed doubts about the suggestions to beautify the building with mosaic murals; and raised questions about how money was spent.²⁷ It was at my suggestion that

the museum decided to play a proactive role in the process, suggesting that a public precinct be created by the removal of fencing that separated the existing precincts of the Museum, the Library and the Municipal Offices and looked for creative ways to reuse existing underutilized buildings within the precinct.

Being in a position in to directly influence the design as well as listening to the dynamics behind the spatial initiatives proposed for Lwandle, presented a number of challenges. For a start, it was clear that given the punitive time constraints and issues of distance (the design branch is in Cape Town) that the image (and the exhibition of which it is part) had never been studied closely by the designers. Instead the project was to proceed against the tight budgetary deadlines and the designers were proceeding with the conviction that the models that had recently been tested elsewhere in Cape Town would somehow improve on the spatial inadequacies of the township space. (Cowen, 2003). In doing so the designers suggested solutions including: using romantic traditionalist spatial discourses and models – town squares, ‘werf’ walls, bright paint colours and mosaic to beautify the buildings, trees and beds of planting – with succulents and flaming aloes – in an essentialised reference to the Eastern Cape.

My own responses and those of the Museum’s Board Members contested many of these suggestions, resulting in tensions and delays in communication, without which the Urban Designers could not proceed. The process was delayed at times awaiting my communication which necessarily took time as I was interpreting suggestions to the Museum. In the messy in-between space of acting as an agent of the Museum I had to negotiate the often-difficult histories of township intervention. For instance at the public meeting at which the urban designers presented the revised scheme, members of the Urban Design Branch relied on the Museum’s curator, Vusi Buthelezi, to translate their presentations into Xhosa for those who did not speak English. There were feelings of distrust and uneasiness from the Museum staff over the appointment of community liaison officers. And there were other points of concern. From the Museum’s perspective there were questions about why money was being spent on trees and not on building and maintenance of basic services which I had to justify. Similarly the City had to be convinced about preserving elements of the ‘ugliness’ of the landscape, that is so much a part of the story that the Museum has set out to tell. Ways had to be found to mark this apartheid character while at the same time improving the environment.

Throughout the process I was faced with the prevalence and the persistence of developmental discourses of the township as a space. On the one hand the township is viewed as a space of underdevelopment, in need of upliftment and somehow peopled with an uncritical citizenry. On the other the township is understood as a space of exclusion and resistance, in which people are asked to participate in urban processes as ‘communities’ despite the often fractiousness nature of local populations. There are histories of distrust in Planning processes where objections by people have often been easily ignored by the Council authorities, who have continued in a self-assured policy of spatial intervention through budget spending. And unfortunately – unlike where there are contestations over land in high yielding land market areas – such contestations often remain unheard. City Authorities rely on public participation processes as the mechanisms for managing ‘community’ opinions. There is no trust in this as a process of negotiation which has more often than not resulted in self-legitimising public participation processes serving developers’ interests.

Through my own agency I was acutely aware of the role that I was playing in intervening in this seemingly intractable process, fraught with problems of histories of disciplinary authority, violence and dispossession. Instead of trying to find a stable set of ideas to work with, as many community architects have done in the past, I chose to work with the inconsistencies and discontinuities of my own professional authority, acutely aware of the powerful allegorical nature of images of the township that remain intact despite a ten year period post-apartheid.

The plans for Lwandle have now been built and are very different to the initial proposals. The spatial intervention was driven in some ways by my own specialist intervention working in association with the urban designers as well as by the Museum's needs. The spatial intervention is only one dimension of the effect of the project which has to date met with much local support. It remains to be seen if the spatial changes will in some way change peoples' experiences of Lwandle as a township space. The irony of the situation is that the allegorical image of the township community project has remained pervasive, despite the presence of a resistive, critical and imaginative 'community' at the Museum.

Conclusion

In this piece my interest has been in exploring the concept of the township in relation to questions of disciplinary authority, and the ideas of racialised space-making or more simply racial power. I have argued that images of township design operate as allegories of spatial concepts that have persisted and been reproduced in ways that are simplistic and literal. These images in which the categorisation of space into zones of use was a primary intention of modernist spatial practices, conveniently adopted by the apartheid state to further the social and ideological intentions of legalised segregation, is the underlying form of the inherited landscape of the Townships Now, that we are attempting to confront.

I have suggested that there is the need for a radical shift in the ways in which spatial interventions are conceived and made-material in the space we call the township. But it is not so much what we do in these spaces that concerns me for now, but how we go about thinking and talking about the space. Do we have adequate tools with which to think? Have we not exhausted the old categories? Do we have the words with which to speak?²⁸ How useful are the distinctions we inadvertently make – between rural and urban, city suburb and township, informal settlement and squatter spaces? Or do we need to confront these distinctions at a much more elementary level?

This problematic is succinctly put by Edward Soja, quoted in a recent interview in the *Journal of Social Archaeology* entitled "Spatiality past and present":

'...the powerful critique of established disciplinary traditions of spatial thinking that was embedded in the arguments of Lefebvre and Foucault continues to have only a limited impact on the spatial disciplines to this day. When their work is recognized at all it is typically seen as reinforcing and legitimizing many of the same conventional approaches to geography, architecture, or urban studies that Lefebvre and Foucault were criticizing. There was reason to be pleased that these 'outsiders' seemed to be saying nice things about geography and architectural theory and space and cities, but little perceived the need to change established modes of thinking and analysis. So, despite the spatial turn there is still a continuing need to assert the importance of spatial perspective not just to those who do not have a rich spatial imagination but, perhaps more so, to those who do.'²⁹

- ¹ This paper forms part of research related to the National Research Foundation (NRF) funded team project entitled the *Project on PublicPasts* based in the History Department at the University of the Western Cape. The financial support of the NRF towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.
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