Notes towards an alternative glossary of (south) African architecture

Noëleen Murray and Svea Josephy, with Tessa Dowling, Harry Garuba and Carson Smuts

Desperate
Residents of Site B in Khayelitsha yesterday collected what they could from the remains of homes destroyed in a fire that burnt down about 295 shacks, leaving some 1 100 people homeless on Tuesday.

Summer Holiday
Cape Town looks set for a bumper season as tourists descend on the city. The V&A Waterfront is one of the most popular tourist venues.

Cape Times, Thursday, December 8, 2005, News Section, p.3
(Photograph, Lulama Zenzile)

Cape Times, Thursday, December 8, 2005, News Section, p.4
(Photograph, Andrew Ingram)

1 This paper is drawn from previous work contained in Dowling, Garuba, Josephy, Murray & Smuts (2008); Josephy (2007); Murray (2006); Murray (2007); Murray, Shepherd & Hall (2007). For Noëleen Murray’s work this paper acknowledges support from the National Research Foundation (NRF)-funded project, ‘The Heritage Disciplines Project’, based in the Department of History 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 authors and are not necessarily attributed to the NRF.
TWO IMAGES on consecutive pages of one newspaper in South Africa, reflecting two ‘moments’ of life in one city, Cape Town. These are the daily realities in the ‘One Nation’ that is the ‘New South Africa’. Discursively framed in the democratic moment of transformation in 1994 through the multicultural ideology of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, life in the divided landscape of South African cities in 2005 continues to be constitutive of hybridities of real, everyday, ‘lived’ experience and essentialised mythologies.

Within the conflicting rationalities of these two urban experiences – that of the ‘squatter camp’, ghettoised existence at the periphery of the apartheid city in Site B in Khayelitsha and the theme park tourist space in the old centre’s redeveloped Victorian docklands – lie the central complexities of life as urban subjects in the postcolony. Put differently, it is within this lived space, somewhere between the themed tourist utopia and the rough-edged everydayness of poverty and dystopia, that practitioners in the spatial disciplines locally find themselves practising their art.

This practice finds realisation in a political, physical and social landscape that is both hybrid and diverse, a space in which multiple publics exist and compete for resources and opportunities. Put another way, these landscapes in our cities, towns, towns, farmlands, and rural ‘homeland’ spaces are merging as South African society is ‘opened up’ to globalising forces, in which the tensions of wealth and poverty are creating an ever increasing division between the rich and poor; between migrants and citizens; between men and women; and between the spaces that one comes to occupy by virtue of one’s mobility or otherwise. It is in this ‘jamming’ together of previously distinct social categories and their associated distinctly formed spaces that the spatial disciplines, and specifically the practice of architecture, find themselves in a postmodern world confronted with a whole new set of challenges.

It might then be, as Stanley Matthews has suggested, that:

> the real challenge that postmodern society presents to architecture is neither technical nor aesthetic but epistemological. Of all the disciplines, it is architecture that most closely indicates the pervasive epistemological crisis of postmodern society. We cannot claim that as currently formulated, the bulk of architecture is in anyway representative of the current state of knowledge. The challenge is to develop new ways of thinking: about culture, technology and the profession, not merely to illustrate these through formal manipulation. We might think of this new way of thinking as a kind of ‘soft’ knowledge, not closed, objective, absolute and over determined, but subjective, situational, open and conditioned by reception. (Matthews 1992: 6)

If we accept, after Foucault (2001) and Lefebvre (1991), or Appadurai (1996) and Mbembe (2001) and others, that the current disciplinary thought formations and knowledge constructions are limited (contained even) by the epistemologies of modernity, how then do we begin to think through, in very practical ways, the possibilities for re-positioning practice within a context such as Africa, or more specifically South Africa? (Mbembe 2001: 44–45) How do we deal with the histories of marginality, discursively inscribed through the twin ‘gazes’ of developmental discourses and spatial ethnography? (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004) Where do these fit into the consumerism of global capitalism? How does practice respond to the needs of different publics? What languages do we have available to internalise and critique disciplinary power? Do apartheid histories operate as forms of pastoral power that affect our thinking about spaces and publics? How do we reimagine the concrete in a postmodern, globalising world of hyperreality? Can we see ‘contemporary’ architecture in any way that is detached from the project of modernity?
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Two ‘moments’ in the making of the canon of architecture

By way of example, as Murray has explored more extensively elsewhere (Murray 2007: 52–56), there are a number of identifiable ‘moments’ that have emerged in architectural practice in South Africa that require revisiting, repositioning and quite simply rethinking. We shall explore two of these moments here. The first is what Murray refers to as the ‘African / ethnic’ moment in the discipline. This moment explores the relationship between ideas of Africa and notions of ethnicity within the spatial disciplines.

As Murray argues, possibly the ‘hottest’ debate in local architectural circles over the last fifteen years has been about the search and desire to inscribe buildings with African identity. The ‘heat’ in these debates, she suggests, has come from an awkwardness surrounding the articulation of race in the spatial disciplines (Nehuleni 2000: 69). From debates in the university studios to experiments on the ground, the African moment in the discipline historically has been an ethnographic one.

A second aspect of this ‘moment’ is a more historical one. Ethnographic studies of African architecture abound, in which traditional dwellings and settlement forms have been studied, classified, drawn and documented. Working much like colonial anthropologists in ‘the field’ and in the academy, these architects have collated extensive and significant records of traditional ways of living. These studies rely on many of the characteristics of colonial scholarship, such as tribal classification and rural geographies. Key works include Peter Rich’s JoBurg and Sun City (timeshare) by Svea Josephy
study of the Ndebele, Barry Bierman’s studies of the Zulu ‘indlu’ (beehive hut), Franco Frescura’s work on traditional forms of mission architecture and many others. In these instances notions of ‘tradition’ operate as ‘an antithetical discourse [that] maintains the opposition between a developing urban and undeveloped rural’ (Judin & Vladislavi 1998: 30) Tradition has also had an ethnic association, whereby architects have used their knowledge of traditional settlements in acts of stylistic translation into new architectures as a form of stylistic postmodernism. Peter Rich’s own house in suburban Johannesburg uses Ndebele-inspired wall motifs and colours.

A third aspect is that of the influence of African art on modern art and architecture, which is known to have inspired metropolitan modernism. South African architecture is no exception to the global trend. From as early as the 1930s in Johannesburg and Pretoria, modern architecture has been influenced by African settlement forms, art and culture. Examples range from Norman Eaton’s House Greenwood (1930), in which he created an ‘African village’ for the servants’ quarters, and Pancho Guedes’s eclectic modernist architecture, painting and sculpture (1960s to 1990s) through to contemporary schemes for bushveld lodges such as Singita Lebombo in the Kruger Park by OMM Designs (Cooke 2006: 11).

The second moment under consideration in this piece is a more localised one, which Murray (2007) refers to as the ‘Cape regional / vernacular’ moment. As suggested earlier, questions of African identity and indigeneity have been surprisingly absent within the spatial disciplines, and these have been understood through a type of ‘ethnic’ categorisation. Similarly there has been little coming to terms with the naming of practices and ‘movements’ within South African architectural practice. This second emerging moment aims to shift attention geographically from areas considered to be more authentically African in South Africa – Johannesburg and Pretoria in the north – to Cape Town in the south, to examine stylistic dimensions of this categorisation and in particular the naming of ‘Cape’ architecture as a specific (superior even) regional typology of building.

While the impetus of the ideals of the modernity manifest in what became known as the International Style took root in Johannesburg in the 1920s and 1930s, architects in the Cape remained more conservative and provincial (Herbert 1976: 1). Architectural modernism only really became the mode of design under the new appointment in the 1940s of Englishman Professor Thornton-White at the University of Cape Town (Fisher et al. 2003: 71). Instead of aspiring to the international scene alone, architects drew inspiration from the local colonial architecture of the Cape Dutch – an architecture of whitewashed walls and thatched roofs set in spectacular mountainous settings – which became a regionalist source of inspiration for modernism. Very soon there were a number of architects working in this regionalist modernist way, including Revel Fox, Gabriel Fagan and later many others.

House Wilson by Revel Fox is an example of this regionalist modernism. Drawing on traditional architectural elements such as the white walls, expressive chimneys and barn forms, as well as using local climatic devices such as small window openings with shutters for shade and orientated in the landscape to afford views of mountains and farmlands (yet remaining decidedly modern stylistically), this architecture soon gained popularity amongst designers as a way to reconcile modernist ideas with the historical traditions of building in the Cape.2

This regionalist trend was essentially a romantic traditionalism, which also began to appear in the Cape through ideas about urban design. Under pre-eminent practitioner Roelof Uytenbogaardt a language of space-making emerged which fused the romantic traditionalism of

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2 This regionalism has also been understood in terms of architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton’s theories of ‘Critical Regionalism’ which he produced in various forms, proposing the idea of architecture that is ‘universally aware’ yet ‘locally rooted’.
Italy (where many local students continue to go for postgraduate studies) with that of the Cape winelands. Using concepts and precedents such as axial ordering in the landscape, along with spatial and built hierarchies and the delineation of walled ‘werf’ spaces, a local language has developed.

Allied to this appreciation of the local ‘Cape’ architecture is the work of a group of lay enthusiasts who, under James Walton, established the Vernacular Architecture Society in South Africa (VASSA). In keeping with the aims and practices of the parent Vernacular Architecture Society in Britain, the group began raising awareness of ‘vanishing’ settler or ‘folk’ architecture from the eighteenth century onwards. Studies of traditional settlements have also been the main research product of academics at the University of Cape Town and others whose work in surveying and documenting Cape architecture has been extensive. These works are taxonomies (Foucault 1976), the best known being those by Ronald Lewcock (1963), Hans Fransen and Mary Cook (1980), Vivienne and Derek Japha (1992), John Rennie (1978) and others.

Ironically this fascination with the vernacular (the dictionary definition of which is ‘native, belonging to the country of one’s birth’) has never been questioned or critiqued, and both these practices continue into the present. Architects are still searching for ways to give modern buildings local identity. Examples of this mode of architectural expression range from the Hout Bay Library by Uyttenbogaardt and Rozendal, to new interventions on wine farms by Kruger Roos and Van der Merwe Miszewski Architects and others. Similarly, as South Africa opens up to new development and globalising forces, the impetus to save vanishing local ‘traditions’ of building has persisted and the romantic regionalist approach has continued almost uninterrupted.  

3 The VASSA (Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa) Journal publishes the efforts made by the Vernacular Architecture Society in this regard.
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AN ALTERNATIVE GLOSSARY OF (SOUTH) AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE?

As a way out of what we believe to be this intellectual ‘dead end’ within architectural practice and academic thinking, we have begun working on a collaborative project. We are architects, a linguist specialising in African Languages, a poet and specialist in African literature, and a photographer working on representations of city spaces and architectures. We have called the project Third Worlds (Dowling et al. 2008).

The ideas behind this have emerged through an interplay between two previously completed bodies of work exploring aspects of the South African built landscape by collaborators in this project proposal. The first is photographer Svea Josephy’s work ‘Twin Town’ (Josephy 2007) which provocatively sets images of sites found in South Africa against their named metropolitan ‘others’, while the second is from the collection of essays published in 2007, Desire Lines, Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-apartheid City, which interrogated the multiple manifestations of heritage in South African cities and to which Noëleen Murray, Carson Smuts and Harry Garuba contributed (Murray et al. 2007).

Third Worlds is positioned in a new space, a type of ‘third space’ (after Soja 1996) somewhere between these two bodies of work exploring aspects of the South African built landscape by collaborators in this project proposal. The first is photographer Svea Josephy’s work ‘Twin Town’ (Josephy 2007) which provocatively sets images of sites found in South Africa against their named metropolitan ‘others’, while the second is from the collection of essays published in 2007, Desire Lines, Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-apartheid City, which interrogated the multiple manifestations of heritage in South African cities and to which Noëleen Murray, Carson Smuts and Harry Garuba contributed (Murray et al. 2007).

Third Worlds is thus also set against notions of ‘words’ or ‘language’ in their broadest sense – from the visual languages of buildings and cities (seen in architectural drawings and models, and in fine art through photography, painting and sculpture) to the spoken words manifest in a city that owes its naming to multiple combinations of words, drawing in sometimes complex and hybrid ways from amongst others isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans.

As a part of this project, alongside the development of an exhibition and critique of architectural practice, we have been thinking about what we have called Third Words. The idea of Third Words engages with the notion of ‘tropes’ of South African architecture as critical tools proposed in the Introduction to the ‘Desire Lines’ publication (Murray & Shepherd 2007). This is a means of beginning to think through an act of translation (working both with and against the tropes) and working with the material forms of the contemporary city, towards our imagined Third Worlds. We have used WJT Mitchell’s playful suggestion that the term landscape be considered as a verb rather than a noun, enabling us to enquire – ‘what does landscape do?’ (Mitchell 1994) Third Words proposes exploring the languages of the city’s landscapes in two ways, by imagining a glossary of new spatial terms and by investigating the naming of places.

Our idea of ‘looking’ is set precisely in a space that avoids a sense of ‘othering’ and ‘gazing’ at space as a critical approach to the field of cultural production, but rather attempts to interrogate notions of place from within language and lived experience in our cities (De Certeau 1988). We are purposefully turning away from the photographers’, planners’ and architects’ vantage point that presupposes objectification, and in taking this approach we hope to find new

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ways of understanding the complexities present in our cities as they are experienced by diverse publics.

In isiXhosa, for example, there are many new names which describe dwellings, both formal and informal (Dowling et al. 2008: 10–13). Our glossary will contain words such as:

1) RDP houses are referred to as "Ovez’ iinyawo" – "They that show the feet" – because they are so small your feet actually stick out of them. This term was coined by Holomisa in 1998 in a speech criticising Mandela for the inadequacy of RDP houses.

2) A shack made out of different materials (zinc, wood, posters etc.) is "ityotyombe". The Greater Dictionary of Xhosa, Vol. Q-Z, p. 469 glosses the word as "a flimsy hovel, shanty built of bits and pieces of plank and tin, cardboard, plastic sheeting, etc; such hovels are built on the fringes of large townships and result from urbanisation; the word is of recent origin".

3) A shack made out of just one or two types of material is called "ibhangalo". Such shacks are more up-market than the "amatyotyombe" [pl. of ityotyombe] and are often shiny zinc or wood.

4) A double-storey shack is called "i-apstayis" from the English "upstairs".

5) Brick house/s in townships are called “isitena/izitena” - literally "bricks". Such a structure can also be called “iflet” [a flat].

6) In the rural areas there are structures which can be made out of bricks or mud:
   a) uxande – a four-cornered, brick house with a pitched roof; also referred to as “ufokhona” (“four corner”);
   b) uronta – a hut;
   c) usikshona – a six-cornered hut;
   d) icwilika – a no-cornered brick or mud house (The Greater Dictionary of Xhosa, Vol. A–J p. 339 glosses “Icwilika” as "metal used as a flint to ignite the tinder in a tinder-box");
   e) i-American Flat – two taller structures joined in the middle by a shorter structure;
   f) u-EL – a structure that looks like an “L”;
   g) an “umzi” – the main home of a person.

There are also many phrases used to refer to where people live:

1) People can say they live “ezimcwni”, meaning they live “in a very bad quality shack”. The word from which this is derived is “imbacu” which means “a person who has nothing, no place to live”. When people are distinguishing between living in a good-quality shack and a bad-quality shack, they will say “Ndihlala ezitoyilethi” (I live in the toilets) meaning they live in “good quality” shacks that are close to running water and toilets. If however, their shacks are far from any amenities they say "Ndihlala ezimcwni” (I live in poverty). In Site 5, when people have to give their addresses to the police they say “Ndihlala embacwini” and the police write down “in the wetlands”, knowing that these are

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5 Tessa Dowling has began this collection as part of her work in African Voices.
the poorer shacks in Site 5. Refugees from other African countries are also referred to as “iimbacu”.

2) When you are staying in one place with your family, but you want to build or live in another place, you refer to that place as “inxiwa lam”. So, for example, if a woman is living with a man but she wants to build her own place, she says “Ndifuna ukuphuma inxiwa lam” meaning “I want to [leave to] build my own place”.

3) If you have left a home and no one has looked after it, that home is referred to as “Zwelidala” which literally means “old country”.

The second part of Third Words in this project takes as its starting point the interesting and bizarre names of South Africa’s informal settlements and suburbs: Los Angeles, Europe, France, Vietnam, Sun City, Lost City, Lapland, Beverley Hills, Egoli, Cuba, Kuwait, Kosovo, Chicago, Denver, Palm Springs, Lusaka, Malibu, Bermuda Triangle, Taiwan, Malawi, Hyde Park, Green Park, Lavender Hill, Athlone, Congo, Burundi, Harare, Waterfront, Barcelona, Potsdam, Spandau, Beirut and Hanover Park.

These evocative place names conjure up fascinating sites in one’s imagination. They bring to mind parks, streets, monuments, cities and countries located all over the globe: the Americas, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Their essences are distilled into a redolent signifier, which is then appropriated by a new place, often one in marked contrast to the ancestor whose name it carries. In South Africa many of these diverse locations are concentrated in a

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6 Svea Josephy’s research has focused on settlement names which are connected to places elsewhere in South Africa or in the world in which she expands how many their names and naming practices occur.
small area around Cape Town (adding a bizarre twist to the apartheid-era tourism slogan “A world in one country”): Barcelona now exists alongside Lusaka, Europe is near to Vietnam, Kuwait is next to Taiwan and Kosovo is down the road from Egoli (Josephy 2008).

The focus of this project is thus an investigation into the construction of local settlements in relation to other South African places and similarly named settlements in distant parts of the globe. These works place the suburbs and settlements surrounding our cities at the heart of a network of interconnected perspectives and relationships. These branch out to reveal correspondence, difference and parallels with other places locally and throughout the world.

During the apartheid era settlements were usually given names by bureaucrats, but more recently communities have been responsible for naming their own neighbourhoods (Josephy 2008). Naming practices of the apartheid era reveal (as one might have expected) a general tendency towards euphemism, for example, Atlantis, Grassy Park, Lotus River, Ocean View and Lavender Hill. Apartheid-era names at times connect to a colonial past, for example, Delft, The Hague, Athlone and Stratford Green. While some places continue to be named euphemistically, a more typical post-apartheid era practice is to reference current or newsworthy events (Barcelona, Lost City, Tsunami), war zones and contested areas (Kosovo, Kuwait, Burundi, Congo, Vietnam and Beirut). An unmistakeable tone of sarcasm or even witty wordplay asserts itself in the choice of Beverley Hills, Hyde Park, Sun City, Lapland, Europe, France, Bermuda Triangle, Malibu and Los Angeles. In these cases too, the act of naming foregrounds discrepancies in lifestyle, facilities, infrastructure and opportunity between third-world and first-world environments (Josephy 2007).
Possibilities for intersecting forms of practice

Returning to Stanley Matthews’ challenge to develop new ways of thinking about culture, technology and the profession, and not merely to illustrate these through formal manipulation, and his suggestion that ‘we might think of this new way of thinking as a kind of ‘soft’ knowledge, not closed, objective, absolute and over-determined, but subjective, situational, open and conditioned by reception’ (Matthews 1992: 6), the work of reframing, reviewing and reflection might begin by considering writing, building and exhibition as intersecting forms of practice.

The idea of ‘interstices’ refers literally to the space of overlapping or a shared space; it is often framed in critical discourse as the space of the margins, a space in which the limitations of the mainstream can be recast as possibilities, and it is here that the subaltern, the feminist and the postcolonial ‘other’ have found their voices. It is the space in which critique becomes possible and in which disciplinary change can be imagined.

In surveying contemporary South African architecture, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which architects continue to give form to what Foucault calls the spaces of ‘heterotopia’, ‘simultaneously the mythic and real’ spaces that remain exclusionary, ‘privileged’ and spaces of ‘deviation’ (Foucault DATE) – exemplified and bounded by heightened security, excess capital and where the representational is to a very large extent determined by internal utopic disciplinary codes. Often this reveals the bizarre realities that are made material by designers’ actions and agency. Architectural examples of the bizarre can be seen in the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth by Noero Wolff Architects, where notions of museum and mausoleum co-exist, or the Apartheid Museum by GAPP Architects et al. where gambling and heritage compete for public attention in the same place. Consider too the New Legislature for the Northern Cape Provincial Government or the Baobab Toll Plaza, where images of essentialised African-ness are carefully and wittily crafted into new building forms.

In conclusion, we have argued that we need to be mindful of the ‘leaks’, ‘ruptures’ and ‘jammings’ that this mode does not make possible and within a repositioning of practice we might seek out the possibilities for different forms of practice and critique. In their different ways many contemporary architectural projects are attempts to depart from many of the previous lines of apartheid practice, but few really manage to map alternative approaches to the city.
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