

THE ARCHITECT AND THE CITY

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Editor

Often, the relationship between the architect and the city is not 'made in heaven'. The consequences of this problematic marriage confront us daily when we have to face the inequalities and difficulties of the built environment. In the space between buildings, the crudest forms of confrontation and defence play out. It seems that we've accepted this as the only way we can make our physical world. In South Africa, specifically, it is hard to imagine that urban space can be benign – a place for personal development and the enjoyment of our daily interactions. In this issue, emphasis is placed on the more positive relationship the architect can have with the city.

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Architect and urban designer Dr Kathryn Ewing focuses on creating enabling, humane environments for the poor. Her work is an example of how the public environment can be shaped to achieve positive social benefits. She and her colleagues create often seemingly 'fragile' or minimalist small-scale contributions thus (sadly) seen of little consequence in the face of the odds that we have to handle in the built environment. But we would be

in deeper trouble in urban South Africa if it weren't for work of this nature. Therein is the relevance of her brave contribution, which serves as a praiseworthy example. In a similar vein, Thiresh Govender and Holger Deppe of UrbanWorks Architecture and Urbanism have opened themselves up to 'listen' to the everyday world in a deep, respectful manner. They are equally brave in charting a course in unfamiliar territory, not for any other reason than their fundamental belief in the genius of urbanity.

Emeritus Professor Fabio Todeschini opens up a discussion about a specific proposed development in the Bo-Kaap. He and Professor Stephen Townsend draw

our attention to the fragile nature of our urban and architectural heritage. Once lost, it cannot be regained. The public, to whom we are responsible, should be informed about architectural and urban matters so that their rights and concerns can counterbalance unfettered private gain.

Carl Jacobsz of C76 Architecture, who repurposed 138 Jan Smuts Avenue in Johannesburg, is another architect who fundamentally understands the delicate balance between the individual architectural act and the power of the city. In some way, the intervention in the Wonderwerk Cave, by architect Craig McClenaghan, is the odd one in this grouping. However, on closer consideration, it displays the same deep sensitivity to the layers of man's physical presence on earth predating our contemporary world.

In comparison to these examples, the self-referential edifices so beloved by certain architects and their clients bear testimony to an emptiness of thought and concern. They are always presented in perspective, dwarfing the human observer, and preferably without any context to 'contaminate' the purity of the composition. The concern is mostly with 'style' – the 'how', not the 'what' that has been created. They are filled with 'originality' and 'self-expression', hinting at the hero-architect as the misunderstood 'genius' whose time of universal recognition is in the future. Over time, these edifices become exceedingly predictable, resulting in environmental poverty despite sometimes high expenditure.

An architecture of more humility, restraint and care outlasts these overbearing statements of excess and of the 'now'. It produces far better urban environments, so why is it so difficult to produce? Maybe we are too blinded by our own egos to search in the right places – in the world of the ordinary – in order to create value and meaning for all of us, not just the few. Why are we so afraid of that? ■