

Of course, these fundamental considerations are intact, and remain important, in the production of space. But in tackling the many layers that surround these elements, practice takes on a different position. If this position is underpinned by interfacing with society (as the collective body of multiple influential factors), the process of producing appropriate manufactured responses simultaneously opens doorways that enable a perpetual 'feeding back' into practice; from delivering architecture to broadening the impact of architecture. In this continuous feedback loop, each action in the process of design and delivery contributes to nurturing a societal understanding of what architecture actually is and does. It's a pluralist, emergent mode of practice that is equally pragmatic, radical, big and small, and is particular to any site, project, investigation or conversation at hand. When society is the primary site for practice, architecture is open to the challenges of politics, economy, culture and space as connected stimuli that influence it.

UrbanWorks is an architecture and urbanism design studio that approaches practice with this pioneering spirit, actively seeking out alternative 'deposits of value' in the landscape of the city. As practitioners who design, teach and conduct research, they're interested in architecture-as-hybrid: The studio is the home for projects (and ideas) and each stage of 'completion' is seen as the next discovery that feeds back into the rearing of an emergent practice. Opening the practice in Johannesburg was not coincidental. It was deliberately selected for the array of hard-set, interwoven strands of power and people – referred to by the principals as 'the perfect storm' of conflicting and converging urban forces.

From the outset, UrbanWorks was conceived of as a process-oriented practice, inspired by the relationship between space and politics experienced in similar developing countries. Initially operating as a solo outfit, Thresh Govender was later joined by Holger Deppe in 2012. Govender and Deppe met briefly in Cape Town while collaborating on public projects, working with Jakupa Architects and Urban Designers and Makeka Design Lab, respectively. Even though their Cape Town collaboration was momentary, a shared curiosity was ignited. A shared fascination with space and politics grew in depth and purpose through what they call 'conspirative coffee-shop conversations'. Now, four years on from the joint anchoring in Johannesburg, the pair of directors rely on each other's differences to inform their practice, in which architecture as product is challenged and practice as process is pursued.

## EMERGENT PRACTICE

The studio simultaneously denies and reinforces its own definition. In this conflict of directive and openness, architecture as dialogue weaves together project influences, people and politics, power players, game-changers, the system at large, the hustle, the gamble and street cred. This messy array of dynamic forces is the context for UrbanWorks. As self-identified prospectors in

Johannesburg, they don't want to find a way out; they don't want to leave the city. They want to cultivate an exchange through practice – to instigate, infiltrate and interrogate the perpetuated norms of making space in cities; to engage public culture and space-making beyond convention.

All their sites of operation are traversed as research and development spaces – controlled experiments; first moves on the game board of the city, after which they read the scratches of the various pieces as they move and interact. When asked the big 'Why?', the following conversation unfolded during September and October 2016...

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### CONVERSATIONS WITH URBANWORKS

TG: THRESH GOVENDER; HD: HOLGER DEPPE

**UrbanWorks appears to operate with a series of obsessions (relevance, findings, meaning, scale etc.).**

**What is at the core of this? Why do you do what you do?**

*TG: To test ideas, to build something, to build an understanding – to build architecture – and to create a loose space where everything is tested.*

*HD: It's about the value we put in, not what comes out. It's a humanist approach to space and architecture. We hope that what we put into the practice will impact future generations. Architecture is the result of this process and not so much a fixed value set that guides or preempts an exact outcome.*

**Is there something in this emergent approach to practice that is about validation?**

*TG: In a way, but it's not about the validation of the architect or practitioner. We're obsessed with relevance, findings and meaning; seeing practice as method as opposed to output. The validation emerges through the life of the architecture, not at the moment of it.*

**Is this in any way connected to a 'collective guilt' or calling to 'fix' the spatial (social, political and economically rendered) errors of the making of what we know as the city?**

*TG: It's fascination and curiosity – we don't subscribe to guilt. We work with discoveries in an unknown city, an illusive place. It's a hard place – to mess it up is actually quite difficult. But sometimes you just need to roll up your sleeves, get dirty, and make some deals ... The reality of this is both frustrating and motivating.*

**There seems to be a paradox in the work of the studio; a tension between governance (and people), and the >**

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1 Spatiality of shebeens. 2 Yeoville Recreation Centre Colonnade. 3 Yeoville Recreation Centre permeability strategy.