



Does the scale matter?

TG: *Irrespective of scale, it's about 'asking'. Sometimes it's about the body politic, the reading of bodies in space, to ask 'Can you dare imagine an architecture that exaggerates or simply puts relationships of human beings into play?' From a simple question at a particular scale, for instance the urban interventions and provocations, we learn things about intimacy, distance, solitude ... it becomes about constructing the whole scene. This leads to the next question: 'Is there an architecture that can encourage and support some of these human conditions?' Spatialising shebeens was an important project about understanding a hand-made, consequential urbanism – the impulses of those on the margins carving out a space despite the situation. These projects were breakthrough moments in which we learnt to read the urban landscape in an informed manner across scales.*

PILLARS OF PRACTICE

An extension of the studio's scale obsession is evidenced in the deliberate propping up of their interests on what they call 'four pillars of practice'. The pillars range in scale and scope, and are anchored in different 'sites' in the city. The studio (as a place) and the practice (as a process) live in the terrain between these sites.

The first pillar, *Commitment to research*, is an entry point for understanding. The base of this is situated in the academy, as both principals teach at the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg. The relationship with teaching and learning fuels a range of understandings, from the hard aspects of the city to societal conditions, and enables a dexterity to 'move quickly' between contrasting environments where students test and interrogate established methods in search of the next version.

UrbanWorks is the result of conversations with a range of co-conspirators who may have once occupied a chair in the studio. The principals are Thiresh Govender and Holger Deppe.

6 Illustration of the African Food and Culture Hub in the Johannesburg CBD.

These understandings push against the second pillar, *Urbanism at large*, which brings a focus to placing emergent understandings in the real context of the city. Scale plays a role once more in this context where site is located between tangible and systemic realities; politics and power, public and private, fluid and static. *Architecture itself* is the third pillar where the artefact of architecture, the building, is manifest as a part of an open process. The fourth pillar is *Artefact beyond architecture*, an interest in public art and intervention as a device to instigate responses and collect value by engaging public culture. This pillar sits within the preceding three as an extension of experimentation and testing across the scale of sites within research, urbanism and architecture.

The description of the studio sitting atop four pillars contradicts a stable elementary structure of practice. A neatly stacked four-cornered domino silhouette becomes a fluid feedback loop, rather than a static construct. The intention of each pillar is to grow in scale as needed for any particular project, stretching the membrane of the studio to doorways in all surrounding sites. The imperative here is that the studio, as a home for ideas and a place of practice, becomes a catchment area collecting all the value that enters into it, and capitalising on the growing collection of findings and ideas. UrbanWorks acknowledges that this is the foremost potential of the elasticity of the studio – to aggressively 'prove' architecture at all scales of intervention where the architectural artefact is itself viewed as a momentary piece of co-production. Orchestrating an environment that is shaped by the user commands flipping the research-first paradigm on its head and claiming a sense of authority to produce architecture that is deliberately left open for appropriation.

CONCLUSION

Since their formation, the studio has momentarily constructed fixed framings and in-process snapshots in an attempt to quantify and define the limits and possibilities of what they identify as an emergent practice approach. In August 2012, in a lecture titled *Making sense of practice in Joburg*, the studio was described as a mechanism to carve space meaningfully and practice critically. What was put forward then as an articulated position has since been acknowledged as the central question and foundation to what drives their work. The studio now asks more questions than it answers in a committed effort to understand how architecture can be considered to live within society, and change through how it is lived in.

Four years after stating their interest-as-manifesto, the current studio-as-home framing fits more accurately as a description of their multiple ways of working. In their most recent public lecture, at the AZA 2016 Conference, they alluded to their work and themselves as being the products of many places. This sentiment – of the multiple and the many, and architecture being resultant of – tracks its way through all aspects of studio functions: the personas of the practitioner/s; scale/s in the city; situations; 'site/s' of practice; research; urbanism; architecture and art. ■

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