Overview

Last month in Munich, a group of architects, activists and academics met to talk about African architecture under the rubric of ‘building social change’. On Friday 6 December, the world was shocked to hear that Nelson Mandela had peacefully passed away the night before. I happened to be in Johannesburg at the time; shortly after Lam, someone sent me an image (which I won’t share with you) of an angry-looking young (black) man, staring into the camera with the words, ‘RIP Mandela. We Will Remember You’ stamped across it. I looked at it for a moment, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

RDP, South Africa’s Reconstruction and Development Programme is perhaps Mandela’s most troubled legacy. It was implemented in 1994 by his ANC administration to address the immense socio-economic disparities brought about by the consequences of apartheid. The basic idea was that poverty and illiteracy are not just by-products of the delivery of healthcare, and nowhere has it remained more contentious than in the realm of the built environment. For example, when workers from the townships were made redundant by the RDP’s housing programme, access to clean water, electricity, sewage systems, and so on. Nearly two decades on, the dream of a better life for all remains disappointingly unfulfilled. Perhaps the most telling criticism (if you’re an architect, at least) lies not in the inherent design of the programme, but in its implementation. In terms of both design and delivery, the RDP houses are uniformly cheap, dreary, and ugly, resembling the bleak building programmes of the apartheid state. This is a subject, it is arguable, for architects and critics alike, dogged by a potent mixture of emotions that are often difficult to disguise or deflect. Nostalgia, anger, passion, fascination, sorrow, hope and joy...all of human emotion is embedded in the discourse, no matter how we try to hide it. We’re careful with our language, cautious with our thoughts, often unsure how to proceed, how to work out what we think or say, or even say it. In terms of architecture, the potential for our words (and works) to fail into that murky territory between good intention and bad deed, is huge. Currently, the city of black urban South Africa, the only home I know as a man before I went to prison.

Parts of Boweto have changed beyond belief, granted, but it’s also true to say there’s often little difference between the new models of urban development, and the old. In the South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer’s collection of essays, The Essential Gesture (1998), there’s a sentence that I cannot forget: ‘Row upon interchangeable row of identical brick cabins in backroom formation without any architectural reference points to community – add or subtract a row here or there, nothing would be noticed, the dreary paradigm of black segregated townships. With all the world’s experience of humanizing low-cost housing at their planners disposal, rural South Africans are passing from their round thatched huts to slab!’

This ‘architecture, planning, building social change – was the topic very much at the heart of the discussions in Munich last month. South Africa (and by extension, the rest of the continent) will be the focus of the world’s attention in the next few weeks, and although it couldn’t possibly have been predicted, in a curious elegant way, the TT Mandela’s somewhat risky decision to put on this exhibition has already paid off.

Why risky? Well, ‘Africa’ is always risky. At the best of times, ‘Africa’ is a difficult subject, for inhabitants and visitors alike. Stressed by a potent mixture of emotions that are often difficult to disguise or deflect, guilt, anger, passion, fascination, sorrow, hope and joy...all of human emotion is embedded in the discourse, no matter how we try to hide it. We’re careful with our language, cautious with our thoughts, often unsure how to proceed, how to work out what we think or say, or even say it. In terms of architecture, the potential for our words (and works) to fail into that murky territory between good intention and bad deed, is huge. Currently, the city of black urban South Africa, the only home I know as a man before I went to prison.

Layanda Mychele’s Banding Houses in Cape Town: timber frames and sanding until construction present a cheerful, cost-effective, energy-efficient solution for the community

And yet it’s even more complicated than that. The Irish architect Killian Doherty (whose own project, the Kinsiga Community Centre in Kigali, Rwanda, is featured in the exhibition), sums it up perfectly. ‘How can Western practices outrun the ghosts of the postcolonial and come closer to a modern African architecture? An interest between local (African) government, international NGOs and architects are increasingly linked, this is contemporary mode of practice simply the newest face of neocolonialism?’ It’s a tough and uncomfortable question and my guess is that the answers will take time to emerge. Happily, ‘Architecture: Building Social Change’ isn’t afraid to put these contradictions centre-stage and let its authors, architects and audience thrash it out.

There are some beautiful and moving projects: Débido François Kéti’s Educational Facility and Women’s Centre (Burkina Faso); Layanda Mychele’s Sanding Houses (South Africa); the TUM’s Skills Centre (Kenya); Doherty’s Kinsiga Community Centre (Rwanda) and Shihan Javaid’s Women’s Opportunity Centre (also in Rwanda, see p6) stand out, for different reasons.

Some are ambitious, poetic spaces; others have a history of design development and community involvement that eclipse what they might look (or feel) like. Some are almost monolithic, some remote and rural, and others live in that indefinable, ‘informal’ space in between that is somewhere particular to Africa. At the day-long seminar that accompanied the exhibition, there were some memorable moments: frank, provocative and perhaps even painful conversations over the course of the day. A brief presentation from an Austrian architect that wasn’t about Africa at all, but about building a centre for the homeless in Vienna, which neatly brought the subject of social change back full circle – a pedagogic reminder that Africa doesn’t have a monopoly on social injustice.

Over the past decade, there have been a handful of key events in the emerging discourse around African architecture that really stand out. This is one of them. In spite of the complexities (and possibly even because of them), there is enormous creative potential constantly waiting under the surface of this discourse, flammable, like oil. RDP planners are duly reminded.

Please take note.

‘Architecture: Building Social Change, at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich until 2 February

The Kinsiga Centre in Kigali, Rwanda was featured to catalyze social reconciliation