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The Congress as architecture: modernism and politics in the postwar Transvaal

"the architect…cannot pursue his art in the seclusion of a studio, but must help to prepare the ground for it on the battleground of social forces"

Kurt Jonas (1938)[a]

Introduction

Two significant strands of South Africa's history - the precocious modern movement architecture of the Transvaal Group, and the political resistance that led up the Congress of the People and the Rivonia trial - remain the research subjects of quite separate disciplinary fields[b]. One of the few pieces of writing to span between the two is Rusty Bernstein's autobiography, *Memory Against Forgetting* (), which traces his involvement in the political events of the 1950's, while alluding how the theory and practice of architecture helped to support him in both material and ideological ways.

Despite the optimistic title of Bernstein's book, there is a real threat of memory loss around the way in which the events of the postwar period related to the ideals of modernity that, in both its spatial and social manifestations, was to inspire South Africa's political transformations as late as in the 1990's. This article revisits memories of the earlier period in order to suggest some associations between the apparently diverse areas of architectural utopianism and practice, political theory and activism, and the specific events around the planning of the Congress of the People in 1955. These associations suggest that there is an imaginative vision at the heart of modern architecture that is quite elastic, conceptually: one capable of translation into diverse manifestations, some physical, some unrealisable, and some only to be realised at another time.

The article is inspired by the stories of a handful of radicalised white architects in the 1950's, whose early formation overlaps with the emergence of the Transvaal Group. These architects, including Rusty Bernstein, Ozzy Israel, Alan Lipman, Roy Kantorowich and Clive Chipkin, studied at the University of the Witwatersrand in the late 1930's, or in the immediate post-war period. These architects are not remembered for their designs but for the influence of their political positions on events. They were drawn to opposition politics as a way of achieving conditions of freedom and equality,

conditions that would be necessary in order to implement the progressive modern architecture in foreign journals and books, including discreetly acquired copies of *Architektura CCCP* , that inspired them. However these conditions were not to be met in their working careers, and political events - the Sharpeville Massacre in 1961 and the Treason Trial - led them variously into exile, imprisonment, writing work and practice within the very limited circle of private clients who shared their ideals.

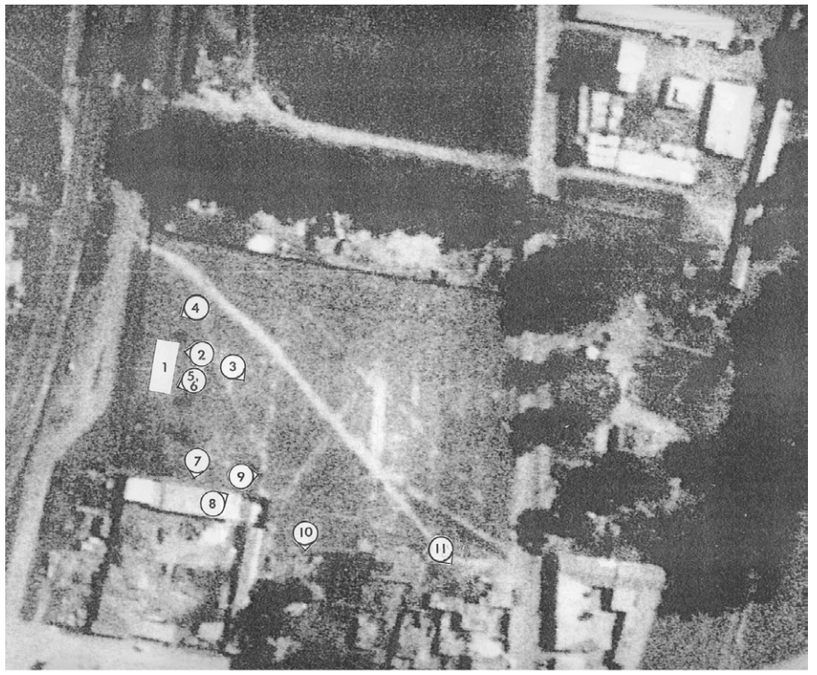
Their most significant building, according to Clive Chipkin, was the ephemeral infrastructure that they designed and built near Soweto with hessian and timber for a political rally, the Congress of the People, in 1955. This event launched the Freedom Charter, a list of fundamental social demands including access to housing, schools and freedom of association, and in turn, in the 1990's, became the basis for the spatial ideals of the new nation of post-apartheid South Africa. Rusty Bernstein played central roles in organising both the space and the written text of the Freedom Charter. The Congress architects' political activities contrast with mainstream architectural activity, which was largely supportive of the capitalist apartheid state. To trace this history, it was necessary to use personal narratives as evidence, in the absence of a drawn or built archive: indeed, this may be a rare case in architectural history where the paper archive was swallowed in the face of a police raid.

In its motives, this article, as well as paying tribute to a generation whose political choices led to personal hardship, tries to broaden the limits of architectural discourse to include not only built products but also their rebus, their exclusions. It suggests that what is not able to be realised does not necessarily disappear, but rather, might be translated into some other mode. Seeing the Congress as architecture draws attention to the other modernisms of the imagination that cross between transnational boundaries, between conditions of the built and the unbuildable.

The backdrop of 1930's Johannesburg

It could be argued that the history of the Congress event simply lies outside narratives of South African modern architecture[c]. Yet the political activities of its architects responded in part (at least) to the same conditions that framed the production of modern architecture; specifically, the urban, social and political context of modern Johannesburg. Their enthusiasm for built modern architecture and for political activism emerged at the University of the Witwatersrand ("Wits") in the 1930's. The school of Architecture had been in existence since the early 1920's, serving the needs of the city of

Figure 1 - Aerial image



Johannesburg, where urban growth was led by investment in the mining industry, and the industries and housing that supported it, to the extent that, despite the global depression, a building boom happened in the mid 1930's.

Increasingly, the growing city of Johannesburg was racially segregated, in part through slum clearance laws that acted on the mixed race areas, and the prohibition of land sales to blacks. These laws worked to secure areas for speculative investment and to create a huge demand for living space for black residents displaced by removals as well as newcomers. The growth of industrial and residential suburbs for whites is mirrored by that of the camp of hessian and wood houses, defiantly erected on the outskirts of what is now Soweto by the Sofasonke Movement.

The duality of the city was reflected in the voices emerging from Wits in the 1930's. Rex Martienssen's propaganda for the formal experimentation of the European modern movement was paralleled by the influence of a brilliant student, Kurt Jonas. Jonas had been born in Johannesburg but had studied classics and later, law and economics in Germany[d], and looked at housing rights for his thesis. Rising nationalism forced him to return to South Africa in 1933, and he enrolled in the architecture course the following year. Jonas became the Chairman of the Architecture Students Society, a position from

which he disseminated his ideas on politics and architecture. Although Jonas was socially close and hugely admiring of Martienssen, who in turn published his writing[e], his politicised vision was in contrast with Martienssen's socially disengaged interest in formalism.

Jonas introduced a number of themes into the discourse of the student group, drawing in particular on Marxist theory. While holding onto his enthusiasm for classical formal principals, he attempted to locate the production of architecture within economic and socio-political systems. He argued this position both historically and within his own time, and indeed in relation to his own circumstances. One of his activities was forming a union of draftsman to protest against their exploitation – his own situation in the office of Harold le Roith as example – by the larger practices within Johannesburg. He was careful to distinguish between the practice of architecture by a low paid junior, and that of a practice owner whose profits were derived from the labour of his employees; the former, a worker, the latter, a capitalist.

Jonas put the implications of practice in a politicised economy in a nutshell: "if the architect is to remain the constructor par excellence he has to take sides; he must be an architect not only of buildings, but he must also try to take his share in the architecture of society. He must, to my mind, try to take part in the struggle for a new society – throwing a bridge, an arch – parabolic, if you like – across the gulf that separates us from the society to come." [f] His own response to this broader context was to raise the possibility of a designed engagement with so-called "native" housing – that is, urban housing for black South Africans. He collaborated with four fellow students in designing a township for 20000 people as his thesis[g] . The scheme drew its geometry and housing blocks from the residential layout of the Ville Radieuse but, like the defacto dormitory townships of Johannesburg, lacks the industrial and administrative elements.

Tragically, neither Jonas nor Martienssen were to see the consequences of their influence on the younger generation of graduates. Martienssen fell ill and died during his military training; and Jonas emigrated to Palestine where he too passed away. But as one of the younger students, Rusty Bernstein, said of Jonas, whose intellectualism and ideas he deeply admired: "he pointed me in the right direction"[h]. As predicted by Jonas, those architects and students whose wartime experiences had exposed them to modern, racially pluralist social units in the army, as well as to the negative consequences of totalitarianism, were drawn to opposition politics as a way of making sense of practicing as architects in the racially segregated context to which they returned.



Figure 2 - Protestors

By 1948, the Afrikaner nationalist party had won the South African elections and begun to codify and enact the legislation that would bring *apartheid* into being. Whites who opposed the party could join the opposition movement either through the South African Communist Party or the liberal Congress of Democrats. The movement's work was both underground and propagandist. Bernstein worked daytimes as an architect in the office of Wayburne and Wayburne, and in the evenings editing Fighting Talk, an ex-Serviceman's magazine, as well as Party activities. Like that of most of his contemporaries, his built work was entirely for private clients, and consisted largely of commercial buildings, drive-in cinemas, and houses in the white suburbs.

The Freedom Charter

By the 1950's, the apartheid state had developed complex set of interrelated and spatially directed laws intent on dividing the country along racial lines. Working for the opposition, Bernstein became deeply involved in drafting an ambitious charter for the alliance of Congress associations that represented the underground political opposition. The Freedom Charter grew from a campaign that called on ordinary people to imagine a new political system "if you could make the laws"[i]. Thousands of demands were gathered on scraps of paper, to arrive in Bernstein's office and stuffed into a trunk. In time, Bernstein and some volunteers sorted the demands as far as possible, and then set out to draft these into a political document.

The Freedom Charter was structured by Bernstein as ten clauses that describe fundamental social demands including access to housing, schools and freedom of association. Its preamble begins "South Africa belongs to all who live in it…" A specifically spatial clause dealing with housing and planning:

> *There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!*
>
> *All people shall have the right to live where they choose, be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security;*
> *Unused housing space to be made available to the people;*
> *Rent and prices shall be lowered, food plentiful and no-one shall*

go hungry;
A preventive health scheme shall be run by the state;
Free medical care and hospitalisation shall be provided for all, with special care for mothers and young children;
Slums shall be demolished, and new suburbs built where all have transport, roads, lighting, playing fields, créches and social centres;
The aged, the orphans, the disabled and the sick shall be cared for by the state;
Rest, leisure and recreation shall be the right of all:
Fenced locations and ghettoes shall be abolished, and laws which break up families shall be repealed.

(Freedom Charter, 1955)

The alliance planned the launch of the Charter as a massive political event, named the Congress of the People (COP), for the 25th of June, 1955. The site was a field in Kliptown, lying to the southeast of Johannesburg and what is today Soweto. The peri-urban status of the land meant it was available for a mixed race gathering. It was one of the few areas near the city where freehold land rights allowed for racial integration, and consisted of a cluster of buildings including largely Indian owned businesses, houses and shacks, and the soccer field where the event was held[j].

Writing of his reaction to this marginal site, Bernstein evokes its inadequacies in functionalist terms, and the near impossibility of overcoming them outside of the apparatus of the modern state: "there was much to do to make it acceptable as the COP site. It had to be fenced; water, and electricity to power minimal lighting and public address equipment had to be brought in; sanitary accommodation and rubbish removal had to be arranged, the site cleared, a platform erected, and some sort of seating arranged for an unknown audience which could run into thousands. And after all that, there were the logistics of the day itself – the feeding of the delegates and the provision of overnight accommodation for those who would come from afar. It was a project which would strain the resources of a minor town council, but it would have to be done with very little money and a volunteer corps of unpaid Congress workers"[k]

The event's infrastructure was put together from rough timber and hessian, following a diagram prepared by Bernstein. His colleagues at Wayburne and Wayburne, Alan Lipman and Clive Chipkin, helped to realise the event, since Bernstein was banned from public gatherings. Chipkin supervised the construction. The centrepiece was a raised platform, in front of which were log seats. Hessian enclosures were built around the public toilets. The banners of the delegate organisations hung from timber poles and surrounding fences.

Chipkin has said that, with hindsight, this construction was the most significant one of his career as an architect[l]. The achievement of the Congress's architects lay in the construction of an infrastructure for a human gathering that defied the segregated space sanctioned by the state. Permissible, ironically, because the site's town-planning zoning was peri-urban, and hence still exempt from racial restrictions, the ephemeral infrastructure of Congress represented the unique occurrence of an architectural space that was in fact truly urban[m]. It was, for a single day, somewhere different to the apartheid city: racially and culturally inclusive, emotionally charged and replete with the frictions that constitute the ideal of democratic public space.

Repression

The state reacted to the Congress movement with increasing harshness. In late 1956, one hundred and fifty six political activists, including Bernstein, were arrested and charged with treason, through their arrangement of the COP campaign. The dismounted, confiscated debris of the event, including the catering signs, were brought into the trial as evidence. Like the COP site, the trial reconfigured a spatiality that was in contrast to the norm. Bernstein noted how, within the formal space of the colonial Drill Hall, the leadership of the Congress movement, so seldom together because of segregation, finally managed to coalesce as a group across racial lines[n].

As the trial dragged on, new pockets of grassroots resistance emerged. In 1961, a protest by members of the Pan African Congress against pass documents ended in a massacre, with sixty-nine people shot dead by the police. A State of Emergency was declared, and hundreds more activists arrested. Most of the activist architects associated with the Congress left the country, some to work as academics[o]. Those who stayed lived off private commissions for the very limited circle of private clients who shared their liberal views. In 1964, Bernstein, after years of arrest, and deeply concerned about his wife and children's welfare, made a difficult decision to go into exile. With his family, he left South Africa in secret, moving first to Zambia, where he sought a government planning jobs, and when that did not materialise, to London and private practice.

Housing in the 1990's

In South Africa, a cycle of protests and repression began to emerge, but it would take until the 1990's before it was apparent that a democratic government would finally be installed in South Africa. In this period, the Freedom Charter and its demands became once again debated, this time as the blueprint for the state's role in the post-apartheid period. Although the Charter underwent various transformations before becoming national policy, it continued to emphasise the state's role in housing provision for the poor. Under one of Bernstein's former activist colleagues, Joe Slovo, a subsidy system was introduced, and standards for housing types were developed, many deriving from free-standing suburban models – the so-called 51 series - the apartheid government had commissioned in the 1950's.

The post-apartheid government's housing policy over the first decade came under increasing criticism[p]. State led financing is often inaccessible, the low density typologies have led to sprawl on the urban edge, and the new housing estates are mono-functional. All this has proved a burden on both the state and its welfare subjects. A time lag seems to underlie some of this phenomenon. The hallowed status of the Charter within the political opposition, and the modernist vision of houses and suburbs that it implies, somehow led to its failure to develop, to be critiqued or updated.



Figure 3 - Freedom charter

The site of the Congress itself has been commemorated and redeveloped in an attempt by the province to bring economic growth to the outskirts of Soweto. Although heritage studies were done to ascertain the location of the event, the original dusty field has been thoroughly done over. Meticulously paved, arcaded, renamed, with a cenotaph marking the document's signature, it now conveys an image of monumentality and permanence that overwrites the ephemeral nature of the original event.

Conclusion

Modern architecture's development within the context of the European welfare state is well documented, as is its transformation in the passage to other sites, to be deployed within other economic systems: commercial development and colonial expansion come to mind[q]. The modern phenomena of education and immigration are central to these transformations, as is the role of the media and the transnational backgrounds of many influential architects. The case of the Congress architecture presents another instance in which modern architecture was transformed, in this case through the medium of political repression.

Despite its ephemeral and diagrammatic outline, and its single day of existence, the event of the Congress left a deep impression on the political imaginary of the South Africa opposition. Seeing this event as architecture is to recognise as the nexus of a series of architectural visions: one of public space, and how it might become racially inclusive; one of urban transformation that comes from a grassroots perspective, and one of social architecture that is influenced by the international modern movement. The legacy of the Congress lies in the persistence of these visions into the present, as it takes form in the construction of the changing post-apartheid city. This legacy of the Congress as architecture draws attention to importance of recognising the imaginative forms of modernism that that cross between transnational boundaries, between conditions of the built and the unbuildable.

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d Karol, Eitan. (1983). "The architect and the social system: Kurt Jonas and the Development of the Modern Movement in South Africa". *Architecture SA*, November/December. P44- 45.

e See Jonas, Kurt (1938). "The Architect in the Social System" *South AfricanArchitectural Record*, vol 23 #6, June.

f Jonas, 1938. op cit. (p215)

g The scheme, done in collaboration with Kantorowich, Wepener, Irvine-Smith and Connel, was published in the *South African Architectural Record*, volume 23 no 8, 1938, p344-355.

h Bernstein , Rusty. (1999). *Memory against forgetting: memoirs from a life in South African politics, 1938-1964*. London: Viking. P15.

i Source of "if you could make the laws"

j Douglas Rodd, Sue Krige, Elsabe Brink and Thabang Khanye. (1998). *Freedom Square, Kliptown, Johannesburg. Survey of Historical Significance and Architectural Heritage*. Unpublished report for National Monuments Council.

k Bernstein (1999). Op cit. P152

l Interview with Clive Chipkin, Johannesburg, Jan 19 2006.

m I draw here on the definitions of urbanity put forward by critics such as Jacobs, Jane (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. London: Jonathan Cape; Sennett, Richard (1994). *Flesh and Stone: the body and the city in Western civilization*. London: Faber, 1994, and Wilson, Elizabeth (1991). *The Sphinx in the City: Urban life, the control of disorder, and women*.

n Bernstein source for comment on drill hall

o Interview with Alan Lipman, Johannesburg, 20 April 2006.

p Housing policy criticism

q See, for instance, King, Anthony D (2004). *Spaces of global cultures: architecture, urbanism, identity. London; New York: Routledge.*