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Between hair and the Johannesburg art gallery: a hair museum mediating the disjointed context by inspiring public ownership through the celebration of an African Art Form

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ABSTRACT

In the case of Johannesburg, unlike cities around the world that experienced inner city decline, its city centre was never entirely abandoned. It experienced rapid social change. As Johannesburg was beginning to change, the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) was experiencing a declining number of visitors. Unable to engage with the changing social structure, a fence was built around it and JAG turned itself inwards. This thesis explores the intention to take advantage of the rich and dynamic informal industry of hair that has emerged around JAG. Hair is loaded with social, sexual and political undercurrents. In an African city that has been colonized and becoming increasingly globalised, hair's relevance in terms of politics must be brought to the forefront. By acknowledging the thriving inner workings and its contributors and by engaging in a critical discussion that people can relate to, JAG will be embraced by the community again.

An intervention of mediation through architecture is proposed. A Hair Museum perched on the opposite side of the railway that weaves JAG closer into its current context by opening and improving dialogue between the disjointed surroundings. A new museum as a mediator explores the idea of museum-as-urban system. The question is asked whether a public institution is capable of assisting a society through a museum by looking at the concept of the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia,* which means the perfection of the body and city based on balance, justice and proportion. This thesis essentially explores Julian Carman's idea of a museum[1]; that the key to JAG's survival and upliftment lies only if it inspires public ownership.

This thesis will explore the significance of celebrating hair in an African city with visible impacts of an imperialist past. By celebrating hair, thereby beginning the discourse of it's connotations, will allow for a transgression into where society and its' perception of itself stands in a globalizating world. Museum's play a key role in society to not only preserve memories but also re-ordering them and making sense of them for later generations (Watson, 2007: 4). The proposed Hair Museum as mediator is not so much about saving a contested and feared city- as much as it is about embracing the new spirit of the city and encouraging the potential held within.

1 Julian Carman, Author of 'Uplifting The Colonial Philistine: Florence Phillips And The Making Of The Johannesburg Art Gallery'. See References.