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Fire, looting and a church: re-imagining the socio-political position of civic architecture in Maseru

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the cultural spatial practices of the Basotho. The overall intention is to create a new type of public space in Maseru that is rooted in the cultural and social practice of gathering. Located at the entrance of the Maseru CBD, this new public space challenges the traditional concept of a civic building by blurring hierarchical spatial distinctions that create divisions between the citizens and those in power.

This proposed space is not entirely a new concept. It is customary in Basotho culture for a chief to call for a village gathering or "Pitso", - a traditional gathering where matters concerning the people are dealt with.

The Pitso is spatially and conceptually similar to the Greek Agora in that, it is an open space where social and political interaction takes place. It is a temporary space that does not physically exist but rather comes to be through the act of gathering. Proceeding from this two main questions arise; - what is the position or relevance of this socio-political space in contemporary Maseru and through examination and comparison; can a new version of this space that addresses the aforementioned issues be synthesised?

Due to the project's post-colonial context, theoretical ideas concerning the visual representation of African cultures and identity are examined. The design of the Northern Cape provincial government complex by Luis F. Da Silva is utilised as a practical example of methods and design techniques that attempt to foster a direct (and sometimes indirect) relationship with the cultural context of the building.

This precedent study leads to questions about how architecture becomes an instrument in drawing out meanings and thus becoming a symbol within its context.

Beyond tectonics, buildings posses and acquire meaning through association and function (Goodman, N. 1988). The proposed project therefore attempts to de-construct the inherent political meanings of government buildings by reconfiguring and re-imagining public service space in civic architecture.