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The Queer Commons: Interweaving Queer Space into Hillbrow as an urban resource for Johannesburg's LGBTIQ community

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Abstract

The role of architecture as an agent for social change is becoming increasingly important in current times. Consequently, sexuality and its relation to space is a relevant theme in the development of a more responsive built environment. In recent decades academics have started to consolidate and bring to light the narrative of LGBTIQ issues with different theories and methodologies emerging as to how space can more appropriately respond to sexuality and gender. This means that the agency of queer space is not only an important recourse for the community it represents but could also be used more broadly as a spatial tool in places of tension and diversity.

South Africa has often been applauded for its progressive legal framework regarding the rights of the queer community. However, statistics indicate that there is still widespread targeted violence and prejudice towards sexual minorities. Apartheid planning policy, which segregated people spatially across race lines, has meant that an integrated representation of queer space in the city is still largely illusive. It is therefore necessary to understand the architectural and spatial means by which queer spaces can converge in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg. If there is still widespread prejudice, how can architecture interweave into an urban fabric so that the community can access resources without the risk of targeted violence?

'The Queer Commons' is a speculative architectural intervention which proposes a site of civic engagement which interweaves services catered to the growing social and psychological needs of Johannesburg's LGBTIQ community. The architectural incursion is positioned to reconcile the fact that there is little infrastructure to compensate for the vastly different lived experience of queer individuals who continue to experience discrimination and social isolation. Lack of state endorsement for civil service infrastructure has inhibited the ability to create a meaningful public interface for the queer community in the Johannesburg; therefore this speculative development is conceived as an opportunity to engage with the city's impetus to define new sites of civic engagement.

The proposed research places the site in the multicultural inner city suburb of Hillbrow as an integrated re-imagination of the Windybrow Centre. The transformation of the inner city over the decades has had a profound effect on the social context of its queer community which has in turn also exposed its internal divisions. The architectural proposal interweaves existing aspirations for the activation of the Windybrow site in Hillbrow with a new 'Queer Commons' which negotiates between much needed structures of civic engagement in the area as well as an urban resource for Johannesburg's LGBTIQ community.