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Inner-city ritual centre: reflect + facilitate culture

Mavunga, Tatenda

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02

reflection + facilitation

reflection and facilitation

The reflection of discourses and the facilitation of cultural practices is evident in the architecture of the modern movement. The formative years of the modern era were characterized by changes in society, from feudal systems to industrial capitalism, the devastation of the world wars and enormous technological advances (Silverman 2007). The proponents of the modern movement espoused the view, that architectural expression should represent the changes in society through a conscious disassociation from the preceding era. They promulgated the notion that architecture should be free from preconception and untainted by the historical styles of the past. In this respect, the modernist architects echoed the ideals of a society that was rapidly transforming from a feudal past and embracing industrial capitalism with much enthusiasm.

Enormous technological advances gave society hope, for a new world; a world in which all of man's problems could be solved by technology. Many architects were obsessed with "the machine" and would design largely unrealised, utopian worlds dominated by science fiction imagery as illustrated in fig 2.1. Modern architecture was a product of the "machine age" cultural discourses, which glorified the utilitarianism of the industrial object. It can be argued that modernist rhetoric which called for functional, utilitarian architecture emanated from the above mentioned discourse.

The rapidly industrialising and urbanising society, required new functions and new building typologies to be designed (Silverman 2007). Architects were confronted with the task of conceptualising and designing buildings to facilitate the new programmes of the industrial era. During this era, factories, museums, parking lots, train stations and universities were all conceptualized and built without typological precedents. This illustrates the notion that architecture is a response to the changing needs or the changing programmes dictated by society.

"To be truly expressive, a building should grow out of its natural, social, and civilization context. It should reflect not only the personal values, needs and interests of its dwellers but should also respond to its natural and architectural site. Thus the formal organization of a building cannot be imposed on a people from the outside; it should originate from the context of human life in the given region. In this origination the process of spatial articulation results from a thought-full grasp of the dynamic interaction between the material elements of the architectural work and the human vision which guides this activity." (Mitias 1994:103)

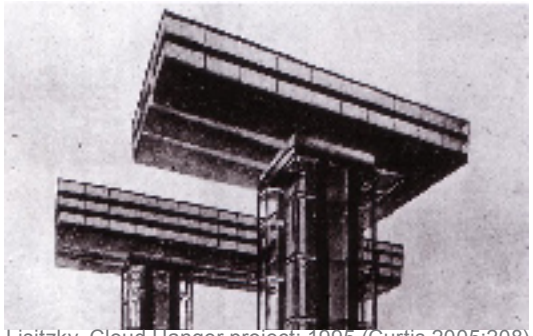

fig 2.1 El Lisitzky, Cloud Hanger project; 1995 (Curtis 2005:208)

architecture, culture and society

This paper presupposes the notion that, “the built environment is both the product and facilitator of a society’s cultural practices and discourses”. Although this is largely an uncontested notion, the work of spatial theorists, Lefebvre interpreted by Mitias will be used to substantiate and contextualise this assumption.

According to Lefebvre “Space is a historical production, at once the medium and outcome of social being. It is not a theatre or setting, but a social production, a concrete abstraction- simultaneously mental and material, work and product - such that social relationships have no real existence except through space.” (Mitias 1994: It can be deduced from the writings of Lefebvre and it will be illustrated later that the built environment is more than a response to the physical needs of comfort and protection. This chapter demonstrates that the built environment is a product of culture and it serves the purpose of facilitating culture.

Culture is defined as, “The sum total of ways of living, built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” (Random House 1988:325). The above mentioned “ways of life” are the “cultural practices” which form the “programme” of the built environment. Buildings are built to serve a function which is ultimately a product of a people’s “way of life”. Without an intended use, function or programme there is no reason to build. Furthermore, cultural and social interactions are only possible through space, therefore architecture is not merely a cultural production of society, it is also the facilitator and enabler of social interactions.

Culture can also be defined as, “the development of the mind by training, education or conditioning” (Random House 1988:325). For the context of this document, the above mentioned “education or training” aspect of culture, which is the reasoning and logic of society, is referred to as “discourse”. Architecture is the concretization of the abstract notions and ideologies of each epoch. These ideologies or discourses are “normalising and exclusionary in that they regulate the normality of what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot constitute valid practice. In this sense, discourse is prior to what may be call the ‘objectivity of things’ (we may include here the supposed objective character of buildings) – discourse produces the potentiality of things” (Noble 2008:4). Noble (2008:4) asserts that “discourses are “a regularity in dispersion, a sameness in difference.” When designing, the architect engages consciously or unconsciously with a discourse to produce buildings that are in some way an interpretation of the discourse. Since the definition of culture encompasses discourses and ideologies, all buildings can be referred to as a reflection of culture.

reflection and facilitation - apartheid

The built environment is the physical embodiment of cultural discourse. This is most apparent in South Africa, where the apartheid system of governance enforced its ambitions of racial segregation and marginalisation through the disciplines of architecture and town planning.

According to Silverman (2007), architects took considerable time designing for the restrictions imposed by apartheid regulations and cultural aspirations. The department of public works had racial guidelines which were enforced in all public buildings. White entrances were placed in front of buildings and black entrances on the sides of buildings. The restriction became problematic on sites with small street frontage, as there would not be enough space for both doors on the building facade. In a series of designs for the Volkskas Banks, Fagan dealt with this issue through the use of an asymmetrical, centre pivoting door. According to Silverman (2007), the door would open leaving two different sized openings; the smaller one was for non-whites and the larger one for whites. Once on the inside the different races would be separated by the door and the tellers could move to either side to serve the clients. This illustration exemplifies the manner in which the built environment reflected the apartheid discourse and facilitated the cultural ideologies of segregation and marginalisation.

The segregated apartheid Johannesburg was also a direct reflection of the segregated society. It can be argued that the separation would not have been possible without the use of town planning controls, in this manner the built environment facilitated apartheid segregation. The use of highways, railway tracks, greenbelts and other natural features, as buffer zones between neighbourhoods, facilitated and enforced segregation. The distance from economic opportunities and amenities, in non white townships ensured marginalisation. According to Mitias “houses once solidly built, tend to perpetuate the patterns of behaviour that they were originally designed to accommodate. Similarly, the spatial relations between one house and another, between each house and its sources of food and water (as well as markets, churches, and inns) and between an entire group of dwellings and its highways and environs, represent a way of life which they at once acknowledge, symbolize and reinforce.” (1994:35)

perpetuate culture - Bororo

The continuity of culture can be dependent on built form. Mitias supports this notion, by making reference to the South American Bororo tribe. According to Mitias the Salesian missionaries found it easier to convert the Bororo when they laid out their traditionally round village (fig 2.2), in a rectilinear fashion. Mitias asserts that, when the village was reconfigured, the people lost their sense of cosmic orientation and social relationships were altered (1994). The non-Christian ritual practices and beliefs that were central to their lives and occupied a central position in the physical village lost their meaning. Since their abstract cultural notions and societal ideals, had no physical incarnation in the rectilinear village it resulted in the abandonment of their culture and religion. The circular spatial configuration perpetuated their cultural practices and beliefs; hence they became more susceptible to an alternative Christian explanation to life when they could no longer see the embodiment of their own values in the built environment.

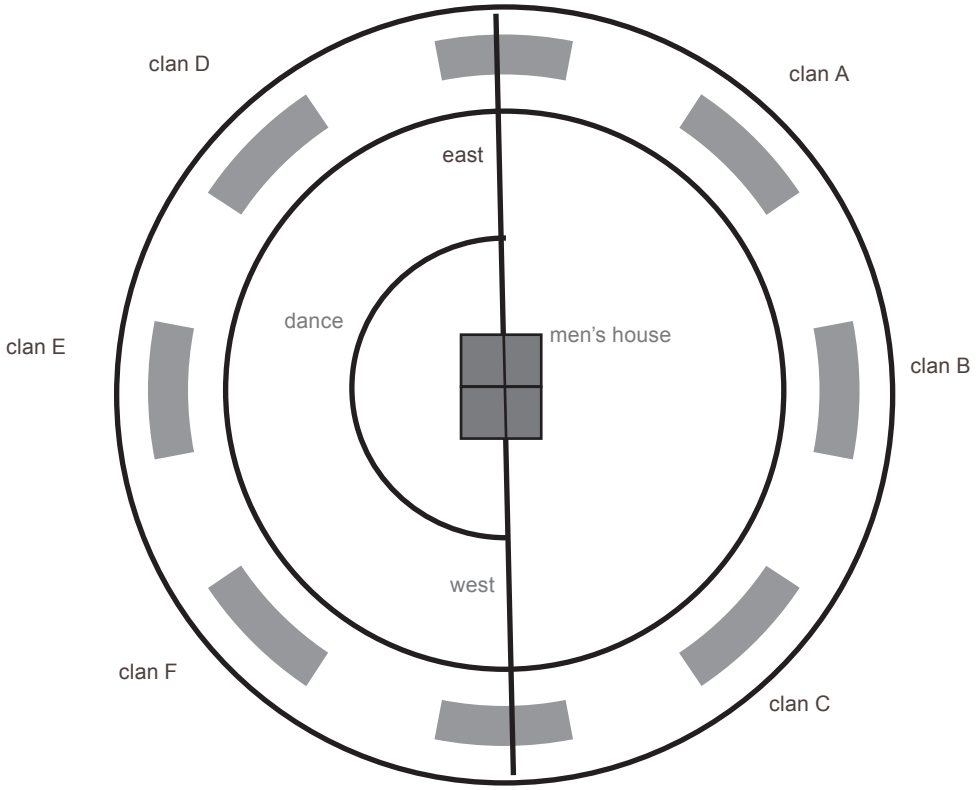

fig 2.2 plan of Bororo village derived (Mitias 1994)

reflect aspirations - international style

The Villa Savoye, an “international style” icon building, designed by Le Corbusier, an influential modernist architect can also be used to illustrate the relationship between architectural form and cultural ideologies as well as the relationship between form and cultural practices.

According to Curtis (2005) the imagery of the villa as shown in figure 2.3, was an intentional representation of the engineering object, in its starkness and lack of ornamentation. The floating manmade object appears to hover above the ground reflecting mans ambitions to transcend nature through the use of technology. The analogy made between architecture and the machine, in the rhetoric of Le Corbusier when he calls the house “a machine for living;” reflects the pervasive technological infatuation of his era (Curtis 2005:280). This Villa resonates with the aspirations of an emerging industrial society.

The form of the lower level which is based on the turning circle of a car as shown in fig 2.4, is a celebration of the automobile. The entrance procession can be likened to what Curtis (2005:282) calls “a machine age ritual.” In the early modern society, car ownership was the ultimate status symbol and this house celebrates the client’s social standing by overtly displaying the cars presence in the design. According to Curtis (2005:282) “Le Corbusier was intrigued with the possibilities of integrating his fantasy of modern life with the ritualistic celebration of his client’s bourgeois habits.”

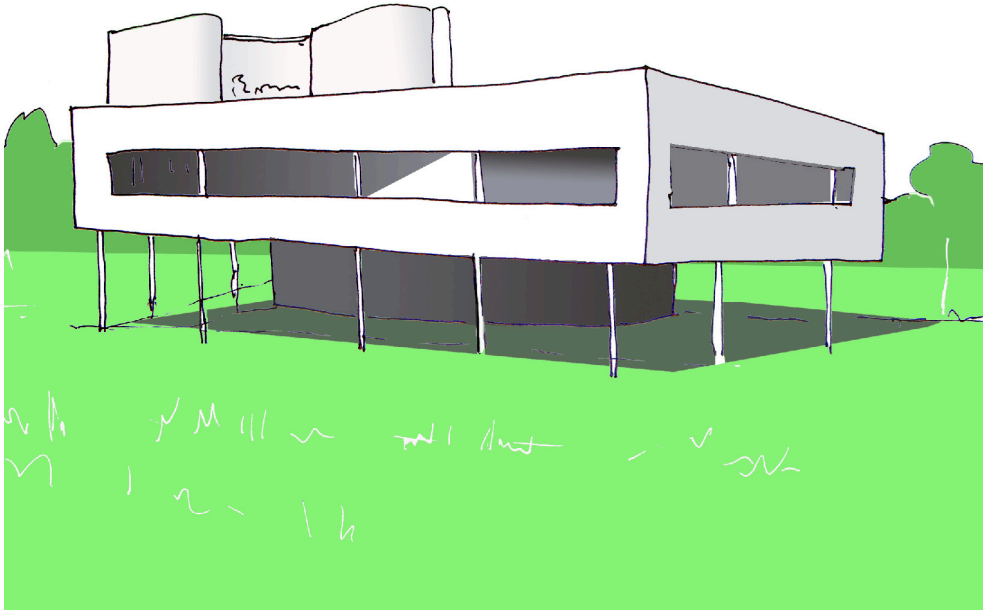

fig 2.3 La Villa Savoye derived (Curtis 2005:276)

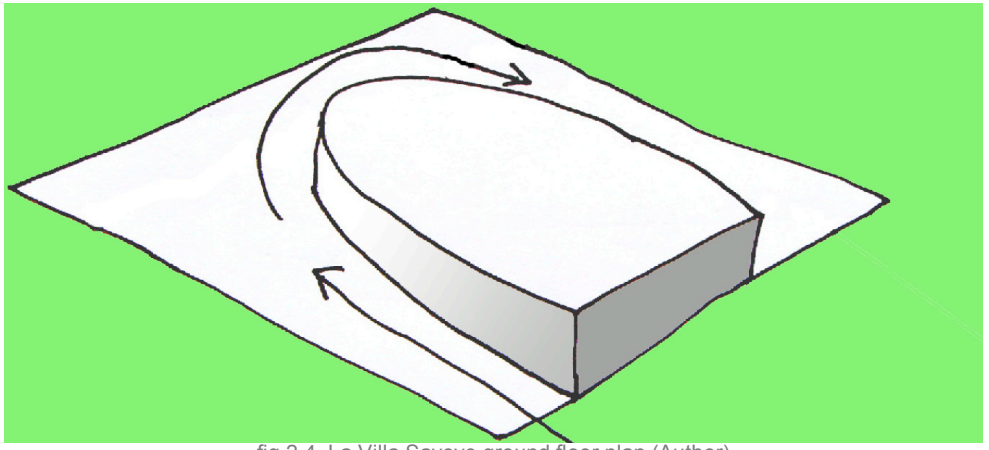

fig 2.4 La Villa Savoye ground floor plan (Author)



fig 2.5 purist still life painting (Curtis 2005:281)

Curtis compares the Villa Savoye with a purist still life sitting on a table top. The plan fig 2.6, as well as the juxtaposition of sinuous curved and rectilinear forms echoes the Purist forms of artistic expression. Purism emphasized a layering of planes and was obsessed with literal as well as phenomenal transparency as shown in fig 2.5 a painting done by Le Corbusier (Curtis 2005). Artistic form is cultural expression unrestrained by functionality. Art and its understanding are cultural productions, through the influence of Purist discourse; this villa displays the relationship between cultural discourse and architectural form.

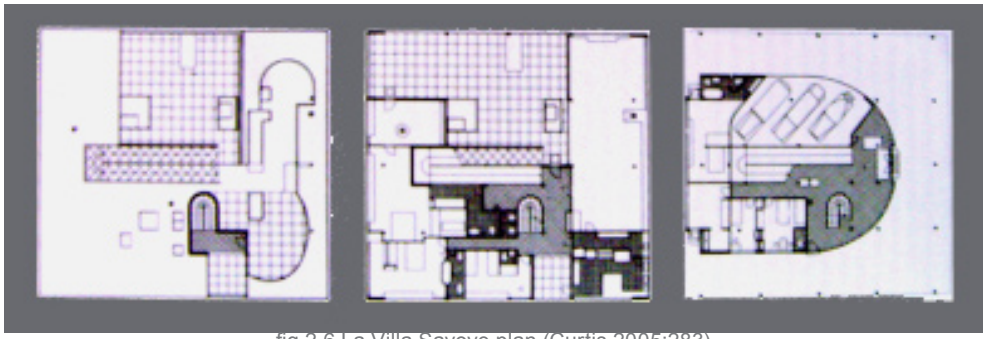

fig 2.6 La Villa Savoye plan (Curtis 2005:283)

conclusion

“It is in the building, whose presence is usually mysteriously absent in every kind of social or cultural discourse, in which the ideology of all imagined communities and imagined environments is contained, materialised and symbolized. It is within space and form of the building, in which the social is most frequently constituted, in which its visual image announces its presence” (King 2004:5).

This chapter has substantiated the assumption that architecture is a reflection of cultural discourses as well as the facilitator of cultural practices as illustrated in fig 2.7.

It can be argued and it will be illustrated in the next chapter that black culture was and, to a certain extent is still marginalised in the Johannesburg inner city. The marginalisation of blacks, their cultural practices and their discourses results in a built environment that neither (completely) facilitates their cultural practices nor reflects their discousres. This marginalisation negates the relationship shown in fig 2.7. To make this relationship possible in the Johannesburg inner-city context, black practices and discourses need to reflected in the architecture. Through the inclusion of these marginalised practices and discourses the built environment can be instrumental in correcting the injustices of the past.

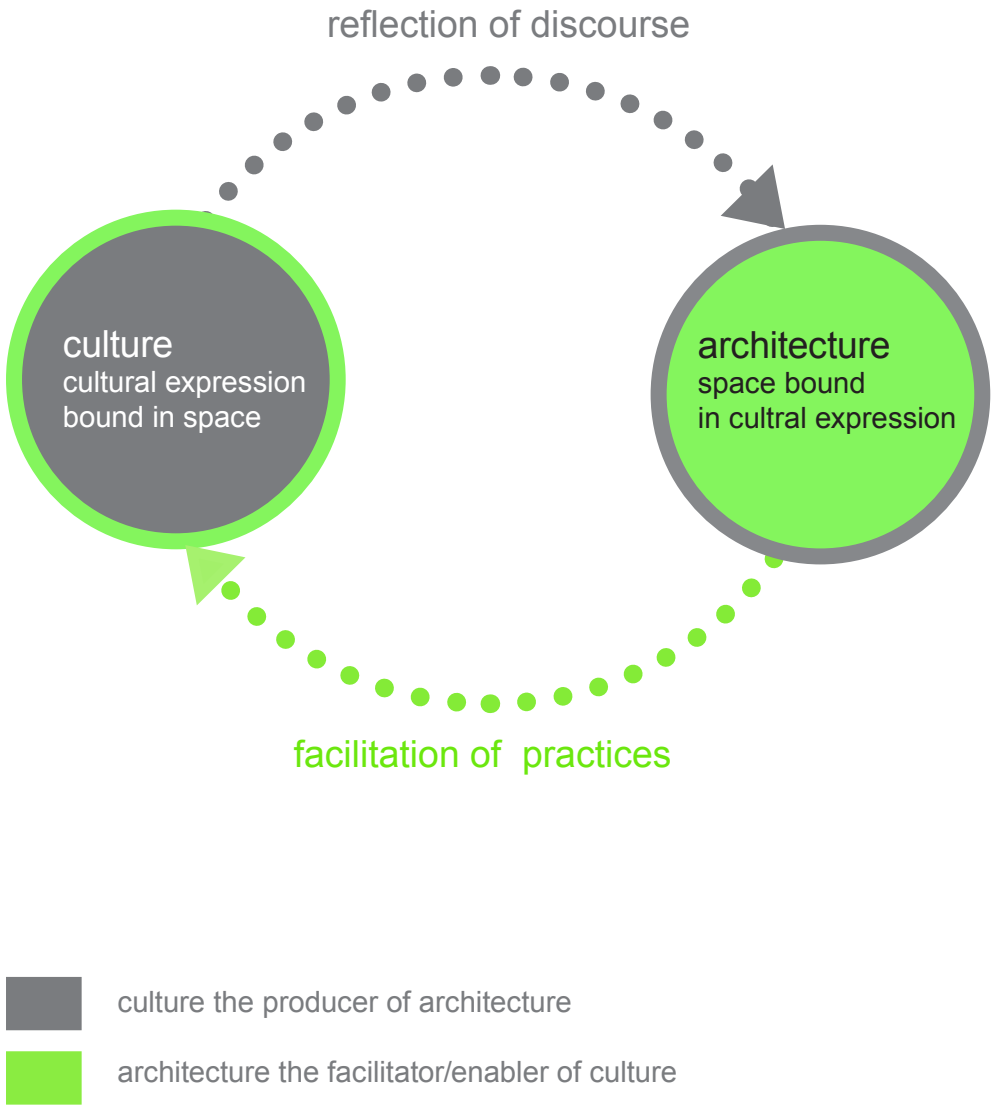

fig 2.7 diagram showing relationship between architecture and culture (Author)