

JOHANNESBURG: A CITY ROOTED IN PRIVATE MEMORY

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Fig 1: From top to bottom:
The transient nature of the early days. (Robertson, 1986)
View of Johannesburg from Hospital Hill, 1889. (Chipkin, 1993:8)
"The City of Gold", 1970's (Home, ART PUBLISHERS)
The Reserve Bank, 2000 (photo: T.Winkler)

Opsomming
In die studie word gepoog om te bewys dat *Gemeinschaft* (gemeenskapsgeentreede) versus *Gesellschaft* (individuele geentreede) nedersettingspatrone die resultaat is van 'n groot ideologiese verskuiwing; van 'n voor- tot 'n na-industriële Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap. Die doel is om die sosiale en fisiese konsekwensies

van so 'n paradigma te verduidelik, asook om waarde aan die privaatsektor "monumente" toe te ken, niesteende hul "*Gesellschaft*" oorsprong, daar hulle ook bydrae tot die kollektiewe geheue.

Summary

This paper will attempt to illustrate *Gemeinschaft* (community centred) versus *Gesellschaft* (centred around the individual) settlement patterns as a result of the **major ideological shift** from pre to post industrial Southern African society. The aim is to understand the social and physical consequences of such a paradigm shift, and to assign value to private sector "monuments", in spite of their *Gesellschaft* origins, as these also contribute to collective memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Johannesburg never stood still long enough to have its portrait painted. A restless city, it grew at a spectacular rate, with bigger and better buildings elbowing out the original shantytown. These buildings were in turn demolished, until little of early Johannesburg was left except in the memories of its people. An exciting place, certainly, but could such a brash and bold city inspire tender memories?" (Robertson, 1986:9)

Throughout the world, industrialised and industrialising urban environments generally display a common feature: the public realm, including its public buildings and facilities. It is around such public realms that cities were 'planned', where development took place, where collective memories of its citizens could be gathered and shared, and more often than not, where public memorials were erected. Regardless of the rate of change, these public environments remained responsible for structural and social interaction.

Johannesburg's urban environment is however an exception to this generic observation. Here, a city was created for private consumption. The result is an urban environment structured

around private sector memorials, with a collective memory that is greatly subjected to diverse interpretation. Johannesburg is not a city of collective, public memory.

The Rand has always been a site of intense political and economic conflict between a number of groups who struggled for power and control of the immense wealth being generated. These struggles were played out between British imperialists and Boer nationalists; between "Rand lords" and miners; and between black and white citizens (Kallaway, et al, 1986).

Here, due to the discovery of gold, a major ideological shift took place: from pre to post industrial South African society. Thus, the man/man, man/land and man/cosmos ideals of settlement and community discourse were superseded by a man/profit, man/money surge (Uytenbogaardt, 1969), eroding in turn a "common culture" (Scruton, 1979), and replacing *Gemeinschaft* (community centred) inspiration with *Gesellschaft* (centred around the individual) doctrine (Tonnies, 1964). This *Gesellschaft* doctrine is associated with a dismissal of traditional, cultural values and "practical knowledge", and replaced by individualism, tending towards materialism.

2. PRE AND POST INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION SOCIETY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Prior to this major ideological shift, settlements in Southern Africa were based on *Gemeinschaft* ideals.

In the interior, between the Limpopo and Vaal-Orange River systems, vast Sotho- and Tswana-villages and towns were developed for ecological and



Fig 2: From top to bottom:
Chambers of Mines, 1894-5. (Van der Waal, 1987:74)
Market Square, 1888. (Rosenthal, 1974:45)
"Between the Chains", 1888. (Rosenthal, 1974:53)

social considerations. Spatial organisations were based on communal relationships, displaying cognitive

structures involving gender, ritual and status. The *kgotla* represented the heart of the community, where men judged upon political, economic, social and ritual matters (Drake, *et al.*, 1993). A circular motive with its male/female; high/low dichotomies was clearly apparent. It is interesting to note, in accordance with Drake (*et al.*, 1993, p.4), that there is a marked similarity between this concept and the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol used for "the city" illustrating the deep-rooted value system of spatial memory throughout Africa before European colonialism.

Ironically, the southern tip of Africa was colonised by a company (and traditionally companies are inspired by *Gesellschaft* ideology). When financial sustainability could however, not be attained, the Dutch East Indian Company retired from this colony leaving behind those immigrants wishing rather to form a new community based on similar *Gemeinschaft* ideals, as practiced throughout pre-colonial Africa. Their settlement patterns were also influenced by communal relationships of ritual and status. A sturdy Dutch Reform Church was constructed at a pivotal location along a grid plan and social events and activities took place in adjacent church squares.

From 1886 however, the story of South Africa was a story of industrialisation. Development patterns on Randjeslaagte played host to a new planning approach: one without concessions to public land sub-divisions, and discarded any prevailing *Gemeinschaft* inspiration. The result was a shift in social, cultural, economic and physical ideology. Johannesburg was the African progeny of the 19th century Industrial Revolution (Chipkin, 1993: 5).

Unlike the Sotho and Tswana towns that were developed around the *kgotla*, or Boer settlements built along a church square axis, both representing the relative cohesion of *Gemeinschaft* planning ideals, Johannesburg was laid out around a central trading square (Market Square). Here, this "town square", which traditionally serves a public (community based) function in most built environments around the globe, was assigned an economic function and was managed and maintained by the private sector. Likewise, the skyline of this mining town was dominated not by the verticality of neo-Gothic ecclesiastical spires, a mature tree at the centre of the *kgotla*, minarets, or town halls but by the secular "confectionery turret" of commercial landmarks (*ibid*: 15). Massive five-storey finance houses, private institutions and clock towers represented Johannesburg's visual character.

The new community embraced a *Gesellschaft* ethos: "We are none of us here for the benefit of our health. Money making and money grabbing is the alpha and omega of those resident

on these fields ..." was the sentiment of the time (*ibid*: 10). Physical ramifications of money making and money grabbing were thus represented as Johannesburg's spiritual centre.

3. JOHANNESBURG'S SPIRITUAL CENTRE

"More men have been knocked off balance by gold than by love"
 DISRAELI

"Johannesburg's spiritual centre was situated on the trading floor and overflow pavement of the Stock Exchange" (*ibid*: 15), in banks, finance houses, institutions and mining company headquarters. These private sector manifestations grew up immediately south of the market square and dominated the city's structure "economically and architecturally, in cost and bulk, in amenity and cultural importance" (*ibid*: 15).

Colonel Ferreira was the first to lay out a camp, in military style with tents and roadways all aligned. Marshall echoed this trend and set about creating Marshalltown. An urgency to peg out portions of land was eminent. Each owner wanted an accurate account of his or her purchased property relative to that of the neighbours, as each little rock outcrop might contain gold (Leyds, 1964).

While stands were being sold in private townships, the Government Executive decided to provide the goldfield with an official "village of stands". In the Zuid Afrikaanse Republic (ZAR), at the time, there was a marked variation between "stand townships" and the existing Transvaal townships. Transvaal towns were laid out as "erven", upon which the owner could build a house, a stable and use the backyard space for market gardening. Such "erven-towns" had large areas of public spaces known as "dorpsgronden". When Johannesburg was laid out, the "stand-township pattern", as introduced in Barberton, was adopted. (Neame, 1954)

Stands were 50x100 feet because such a layout would provide the greatest number, of highly desired, corner sites. Planning for extensive public space was not considered, nor the need perceived. Johannesburg was a mining camp, thus as many stands as possible were laid out and sold before an



Fig. 3: From top to bottom: Markham, 1896-7. (Van der Waal, 1987:77) Stuttaford, 1896. (Van der Waal, 1987:78) Commissioner Street, 1890. (Leyds, 1964:45)

anticipated slump set in. A market square had however been surveyed – for important trading purposes – and this was leased to the private sector. (Leyds, 1964)

The ever-present uncertainty of the duration of gold production, resulted in the development of temporary structures; the lack of Government investment and lawlessness. Johannesburg was dubbed “a university of crime” by the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony (De Villiers, 1976: 15).

Yet big mining houses and merchants, the people with capital, expressed their confidence. It was the private sector and not the public one that did more to assure the Rand of its future.

Private sector investments continued after union in 1910, and when the

Edwardian tide receded, it left behind a series of monumental buildings, all in private ownership. Even public memorials were within the bounds of private enclosures: Lutyens’ great “*arc de triomphe*”, the Rand Regiments Memorial in the Zoological gardens is an example of a typical, “deadpan response to achieve civic grandeur in the city of gold” (Chipkin, 1993: 41).

Within only a few years of its existence, Johannesburg was already the most important town in the country and developed its own unique architectural and planning “*persona*”. Club buildings, finance houses, banks and mining headquarters mushroomed all over the city (Leyds, 1964: 63). Like church buildings and town halls, these symbols of privatisation for the first time in the planning history of Southern Africa assumed a significant place in the general city aspect.

4. PERIODS OF TRANSFORMATION

By committing to the continual reconstruction of Johannesburg’s private monuments such as the Stock Exchange, the Rand Club and the Corner House steps toward ideological transformation were taken. (Leyds, 1964). No longer would Johannesburg be viewed merely as a transient mining camp. Once permanence had been established, attentions were turned to the political arena.

For some years good relations prevailed between the Rand and the ZAR Government, as Pretoria had no inclination of being too involved with Johannesburg’s affairs and this suited the private sector. Carl Jeppe (1903: 130) referred to this period “as a young, happily married couple before their first quarrel”. However, transformation to permanent status required government expenditure and security of tenure. After much convincing, citizens of the Republic seemed ready to tolerate the “*uitlanders*” due to increased economic prosperity. Accepting the “*uitlander*” was however conditional. These foreigners were not to be admitted to any share of public governance. They were denied franchise. Concession policies, including higher taxes and import duties on foodstuff, were introduced and English was suppressed as a language in which to conduct official business (*ibid*). These actions, as was

to be expected, raised a storm of indignation on the Rand.

The Progressive Party was established to represent the needs of the private sector at the “*Volksraad*”. Sadly, no compromise could be attained with regard to the franchise issue (Pakenham, 1979). The consequence was an aborted Jameson Raid and the anguishing second Anglo-Boer War.

After the Boer War Johannesburg’s symbols of privatisation were rebuilt emphasising further *Gesellschaft* impulses: ongoing industrialisation, economic power and newfound confidence. When the Stock Exchange reopened there was a spirit of optimism. During the first twelve months of peace three hundred new mining companies were floated.

This buoyant period was however short lived as the 1907, 1913, 1914 and 1922 miners’ strikes aroused pro-active re-evaluation of private sector values, resulting in attacks on the *Gesellschaft* orientated establishment. These strikes were directed at the symbols of privatisation. Rallies were held on the thresholds of the Rand Club and the Corner House.

5. MEMORY

Ideological shifts from pre to post industrial society transformed the South African urban environment. It is within this transformation that urban environments display physical elements that are either permanent or transient in nature (Row, Levinson, in Muller, 1968: 13). Transient urban elements are prone to variation over the passage of time whereas permanent urban elements structure the physical, social and cultural environment. Permanent elements include major open spaces; elements of the transportation system; physiography; major activity centres and institutions. These permanent elements withstand urban renewal initiatives and facilitate memory. Memory, both individual and collective is deeply important to each entity. It locates us as part of a community (*Gemeinschaft*) or as an individual (*Gesellschaft*), as part of city building and nation-making. Our lives and struggles, and those of our ancestors, are written into places, houses and neighbourhoods. Loss of memory is, basically, loss of identity. The past



Fig. 4: From top to bottom:
The Rand Club. (photo: T. Winkler)
The Rand Club, entrance. (photo: T. Winkler)
The Corner House and the National Bank Building (photo: T. Winkler)

dwells in us and gives us a sense of continuity. Urban landscapes are repositories and storehouses of memories (Sandercock, 1998: 208), and these memories are enabled by Row

and Levison's permanent elements. What we need is a deeper understanding of the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of Johannesburg's history.

Johannesburg's permanent elements are represented by its private institutions, constructed for the private sector as a tribute to the era of industrialisation. Johannesburg's private and permanent elements are its monuments. Whilst other cities around the world and within South Africa display public activity centres and monuments, Johannesburg's history is rooted in private development initiatives.

This city's private repositories of memory need their own place in history, not to honour the wealthy Rand lords, nor the politicians of the day, but to remember all the citizens of Johannesburg who worked and struggled, under extreme conditions, to make these relics possible, and in turn, provide the remnant physical environment. These permanent elements create the *genius loci* of Johannesburg's *Gesellschaft* society and are some of the connections to our past. (Norberg-Schulz, 1979)

Lynch (1972: 1) argues that a desirable urban image is one that celebrates and enlarges the present while making connections with the past. Every thing, every event, every person is "historic", and past events are indeed often relevant to present possibilities. Our built environment in Johannesburg is continually changing often without considering the past, this is because memory rooted in private symbolism is not perceived as having a common value. As true as this may be, the fact

that there is memory, and that it evokes different sets of emotions, is reason enough to foster a learning process within the built environment. The argument for Johannesburg is thus to understand the role these private symbols may play in future regeneration proposals, and not to simply allow these relics to become obsolete in the inner city as their functions reincarnate themselves in peripheral, "edge city" locations.

5 CONCLUSION

The political, economic and social history of the Witwatersrand has been of central importance in shaping South African society during the past century. Gold discoveries prompted the ideological shift from pre to post industrial society.

Every aspect of Johannesburg's *Gesellschaft* culture must consequently be remembered. Johannesburg's past is rooted in private enterprise resulting in political and social struggles between those who accumulated and those who made accumulation possible, leaving behind private memorials rather than public domains. These memorials connect us to the struggles of the past. We must recognise the value of the private sector in history and not allow these physical remnants to become transient in the search for reconstruction and transformation. Instead the role of future urban regeneration processes should be to communicate the value of these private relics to the public. Our private symbols of the past should be used to teach and to learn from past mistakes.

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Fig.5 The historically private environment of the Inner City

