



Durban. The Waterfront.

City to Waterfront: A metaphoric journey through space and time

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Abstract: Durban is known for its multiculturalism, the British Colonial Influence and the impact of the Indian settlers due to indenture and business opportunities. Tourism is rife owing to the favourable climate, extensive beaches and wide spread of food. The architectural value of Durban has not, however, been adequately documented. While the multiple identities in the built form has been documented, the architectural narratives that Durban expresses, between different parts of the city up to the waterfront requires much more exposure. This paper traces and analyses the architectural narratives of Durban via a metaphoric journey through space and time.

Key Words: Architecture, Narratives, Metaphor, Culture, Appropriation.

The urban development of Durban has been quite extensively documented with reference to the political influences of colonialism, apartheid and the post-apartheid periods highlighting the impact thereof on socio-economic dynamics in the city. Power relations in the definition of the urban evolution is however evident in many modern cities, so what is it about Durban that intrigues the mind of the architect? I would affirm that it is the multicultural narratives of the evolution of society through time, which is explicitly expressed in its unique collage of architectural expression that draws the attention of the architectural mind. While Durban is a cogent city in its urban structure, the cultural narratives manifest as a somewhat chaotic order in its architecture and appropriation of space.

The indeterminate dynamics of human socio-spatial interaction have appropriated various spaces along different time scales of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years, in addition to the lengthier political periods of time. The indeterminate appropriation of space is what intensifies the expression of life in the city which is expressed through intensity of human movement in time. While architecture usually assumes a still backdrop to this life, the Durban architectural narrative is rather dialogical – it intrigues; it engages; it asks of one's mind, questions of a lived past, through memory, experience and stories, and of an imagined future.

The methodology underpinning this discourse comprises a mix of published literature as secondary sources and my own primary auto-ethnographic experiences. The cultural narrative of architecture from city to waterfront would therefore be inevitably based on perceptual and emotional experiences of the city.

While the ideological position of Lynch (1960), whereby the city could be understood as psychological experience through mental images could enable the



Fig 1. City Hall, Post Office & Natal Bank as metaphors of British Colonial appropriation during the early 1990s.

understanding of the structural urban composition of Durban, Alexander (1966) proposes the concept of the semi-lattice, which brings into play those rhizomic variables that are neither as tangible nor apparent to the objective eye. The image of the city of Durban, in its chaotic, dynamic and constant flux, is rather a multidimensional experience in layered time; a synthesis of objective / subjective experiences; one which cannot be photographically captured as moment in time. Impressions and interpretation of cultural narrative is never static or solely objective; architectural narrative is not dissimilar. The Durban architectural narrative, I would affirm, reads more as a metaphoric analogy of music; furthermore that the architecture is in fact not frozen music and that architecture is nearly as dynamic as music. For while music is not merely a composition of sounds, architecture is not merely built form; the art of music and architecture cannot be understood merely by listening to sound or seeing facades, but rather via emotional connection through sensory and aesthetic experience. Durban is not defined by any monolithic identity which may have expressed its architecture as music frozen in time; it is rather akin to musical composition of (architectural) moments along the passage of time through space; characterised by crescendo, troughs, peaks and exhilarating interludes. These moments manifest as the narrative of the life of the city through time, from nostalgic to contemporary.

The historical Durban narrative expresses a sort of tale of two cities: an ordered British city counter balanced by a “disordered” Indo-African city; the former being bold and



Fig.2. The Grey Street Precinct as metaphor of the Indian resistance, engagement and layered appropriation of space - current.

of measurable intensity while the latter, of improvisation and spontaneous, responsive expression. This East-West dialectical tension is aptly expressed in musical metaphor by Mansukhani: “In the West, we construct solid blocks of music. After having carved out geometrically, in large sections, like building stones, the seven degrees of the diatonic scale, lined them up and placed them on top of each other according to cleverly worked out architectural laws which are called counterpoint and harmony. In this way we erected splendid edifices in sound. In the East, no one dreamed of dividing sound into blocks; instead they refined it to a wire-thin thread. They strove meticulously to stretch out the sound, to refine it to the point of extreme delicacy... No standardised materials, no building of two or six or ten floors; rather a simple variegated silk thread which unwinds and rises and falls imperceptibly, but which in every tiniest portion evokes a world of feelings and sensations.” (Mansukhani, 1982:1). While the “diatonic scale” of the British Colonial Town (Fig.1) reads as cogent order, the architecture of resistance and resilience in the Indo-African Durban [Warwick Junction Precinct] (Fig.2) reads as the “variegated silk thread”, which spontaneously adapts and contorts to the various social and economic conditions that present in space and time. The architecture thereby assumes the representation of dialogical political, social and economic metaphors. The British Town resonates with the metaphors of monumental imposition and defined function, wherein business (work), accommodation (living) and leisure (play) would not overlap. The detailed

narrative of the architecture expressed as power and domination of place; edges between public and private realms, inside and out, are solidly defined and controlled, which accentuates the narrative of structure, permanence and exclusivity.

The Grey Street Precinct, as part of what is referred to as the Warwick Junction Precinct is certainly more analogous with the layered complexity of eastern music, variegated and delicate, expressing response and in-determination. Here, the characteristic vitality of life plays out through the drama of human movement diurnally; assuming a harmonious yet complex live, work and play environment. The arcaded architecture affords transitional socio-spatial activation and overlaps between the public, semi-public and private realms; between work, play and living. Soft, permeable and interactive edges accentuate the vitality of place, inclusively.

The architectural language of the Grey Street Precinct is unique to Durban and has become known as the “Indian / Grey Street Art Deco”. The architectural forms and façade treatments are rather intriguing, especially to the architectural eye, which cannot quite relate such to any precedent. The architecture expresses a palimpsest of hybrid fusion of Indian tradition and culture onto an alien political and geographical context; rich in motifs and subtly layered decoration. Each building reads as an autonomous gem of subtle distinction within a cogent whole, wherein defined opened spaces and permeable edges which form places for social interaction and display of goods beyond the shop fronts.

Political change during the early 1990s and the advent of democracy witnessed rapid socio economic change fuelling spatial transformation of the city due to intense urban migration. The historically disenfranchised people had the opportunity of better life prospects and would change the socio-economic dynamics of the city spaces. While most cities react uneasily to the increased pressure, and this was not different in the case of the British Town, the Grey Street Precinct quietly and almost imperceptibly adapted to include diversity, thereby increasing the intensity of human activity. The arcades would absorb added complexity and the chaotic order of the Grey Street Precinct would simply adaptively evolve.

Durban is indeed a tale of two cities in dialogical harmony of two distinct genres and architectural narratives which expresses the rhythmic tempo of the city; intriguing and stimulating multiple senses, evoking emotional responses through narrative journey through space and time. However, as one exits the composition one becomes immersed in the contemplative calm of a seemingly untouched waterfront defined by disconnected pockets of activity.

While British Colonial heritage manifests in buildings and the detail of urban furniture along the waterfront, a virtually inconspicuous and rare remnant of another culture, much before the British, Dutch or Indian in South Africa has little representation: the Portuguese presence through the travels of Vasco Da Gama enroute to India, who has incidentally been accredited with the naming of Port Natal (Durban). While the British, Dutch and Indian identity have bold expression in the built form, the Portuguese presence in architecture is modestly expressed by the Da Gama Clock structure (Fig. 3) – a literal metaphor of time gone by, of contemplation and imagination of a different future. The Da Gama Clock, aptly situated on the

waterfront, stands as a metaphor of a past narrative and of the future possibilities along the city and beyond. Thus concludes a metaphoric journey through time and space which gives Durban, a modern city, a unique albeit hybrid identity, which has and continues to culturally adapt and spatially evolve through rich and varied architectural narratives along differing time scales.



Fig. 3. The Vasco Da Gama Clock structure.