

Mokena Makeka, architect responsible for Cape Town Station revamp @ Ginja (old Relish site)

Speech Transcript - Cape Town Press Club

<http://www.capetownpc.org.za/>

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Venue: Ginja (old Relish site in Buitengracht St)

Democratic practice and public space are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, the public space is where citizens engage their community and find self expression. Societies which underinvest in public and social infrastructure, parks, clinics, hospitals, liveable streetscapes inevitably force the individual to react and respond by privatising public experiences. Shopping malls are erected which give a semblance of urban life, but are strictly controlled and monitored as fortresses of commerce, homes no longer are developed in line with residential neighbourhood principles but instead become cosseted gated communities, where a laager mentality prevails and nobody knows anybody. Public amenities are abandoned by the wealthy, as all entertainment can be provided for and contained either within the security of the home or remotely located retail centers. Public space is undermined and therefore by extension, the quality of our democracy as community engagement and self-expression loses the character it would acquire through a broader sense of interacting communities.

South Africa's social evolution is as much informed by legislation as it is by our unique historical legacy of divided and unequal access to resources largely defined by race, and increasingly by class and aspirational drivers. The right to live in a designed and humane environment with dignity is a human one and it is no accident that when nations and regimes seek to strip people of their human rights, the instruments used to articulate this inevitably involve design. The group areas act which still largely defines the character of our cities and therefore our being in the existential sense is a conscious act of spatial planning to forever ensure that our people would be divided long after the legislation was peeled away. The shock waves of the Berlin Wall continue to echo today across Germany, we have railway lines in the country that still effectively separate many communities. The so-called acceptable levels of shelter for poor and distressed people, whether it's open air toilets in Khayelitsha, or shacks with no insulation, or underserved communities in the former homelands is a product of the absence or presence of design. And there is a direct relationship between quality of life, and the environments in which we live, and by proxy the choices and decisions that are available to people.

Design in the 21st century will evolve from being the preserve of the wealthy and well to do, but will become as much a right as access to water, and safety in a progressive people first, society. Resource scarcity and the need for resilient communities will drive us away from rampant, wild and faceless individual consumerism, because the world has changed and we must change with it.

We may not all experience the best designs, or the most innovative solutions, but what we deem to be acceptable, as minimum standards for a humane existence must be transformed. Design is about being thoughtful and creative and putting humanity and people at the center of any design activity. If anything, South Africa has suffered from decades of diabolical design, intended to segregate, to defeat, and to tame the inevitable spirit of democracy and our common destiny as fulfilled human beings. The absence or perversion of design is an assault on humanity. Concentration camps were justified on the basis that the the subjected were subhuman, and therefore the facilities were adequate, they had no rights. It will take many years for us as a collective society to equitably reap the rewards of a progressively designed society and associated environments, but we must start now, because the price of poor design are fragile communities, disparity and desperation between the wealthy and the poor, and the threat of social conflict. The storming of the bastille was a repudiation of those who had access to design by those who did not. South Africa can avoid this by investing in humane social infrastructure that undoes the intentional damage of the past, our democracy demands it. It is not desirable but crucial for our societal development. We must bring beauty back into every citizen's gaze.

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