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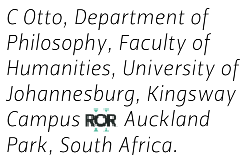
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A Benjaminian analysis of the built environment: toward a critical theory of architecture

Abstract

Walter Benjamin was a critical theorist and lover of architecture, and he spent most of his career studying urban spaces and places. In this paper, we use his theory of architecture to develop a normative critique that can be used to analyse public architecture in the context of the South African built environment. In this regard, we argue that architecture has to function simultaneously as a cultural sign and a material presence, and that failure to meet these criteria will result in the creation of oppressive structures. Since the advent of modernity, architecture has, for the most part, failed to function as both a cultural sign and a material presence. This is especially true of public architecture in contemporary South Africa, and the consequence is that public buildings continually fail to meet their objectives. By way of demonstrating our analysis, we apply our framework to the Mangaung Intermodal Transport Facility (MITF), a public building located in the Central Business District (CBD) of Bloemfontein that was designed in the spirit of modern architecture. Infamous as an oppressive structure in the urban fabric, we aim to use our analysis to better understand why this is the case. By developing and applying our

Benjaminian critique, we hope to bring to light some of the challenges facing the South African built environment, and call for a deeper understanding of the architecture that is being produced in, and for, the country's communities.

Keywords: public architecture, urban planning, Critical Theory, Walter Benjamin, urban informality

Introduction

Architecture profoundly influences human life. The aim of this paper is to develop a Critical Theory of Architecture that is in keeping with the methodology proposed by the first-generation Frankfurt School. By way of clarification, we use 'Critical Theory' to refer to the work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School,[1] and specifically, their methodology of a descriptive, normative, and practical analysis (Govender 2020: 208). In the first section of this paper, we develop a Benjaminian critique of architecture based on the assertion that an architectural object has to function simultaneously as a 'cultural sign' – that is, the experiences, traditions, rituals, and history of the economic, political, and socio-cultural context – and a 'material presence', including the 'form', 'overt function', 'covert function', 'concrete materiality', and 'abstract materiality' of architecture (Benjamin and Rice 2007). Furthermore, we assert that contradictions between these different facets of architecture give rise to the conflicts that render an architectural object oppressive. Using this Benjaminian framework, we aim to develop the proposed descriptive and normative critique of a Critical Theory of Architecture. [2]

In the second section of this paper, we apply our normative Benjaminian framework to the Mangaung Intermodal Transport Facility (MITF), a transport interchange and traders' market in the Central Business District (CBD) of Bloemfontein, Free State. Using this framework, we critique the building, which can be considered both oppressive – on account of the asymmetrical

1 The capitalisation of 'C' and 'T' denotes Critical Theory as developed by the Frankfurt School; in contrast 'critical theory' denotes a broader field of study, e.g. critical race theory.

2 We understand that developing a Critical Theory of Architecture is an exhaustive project that cannot be contained in one paper, and we therefore aim to only develop and synthesise a framework for a normative and descriptive critique of architecture in this paper. We cannot successfully address all aspects of the Critical Theory methodology, and doing so will be the subject of future work.

power distribution that it gave rise to – and a failure that had devastating consequences for the community.[3]

Unfortunately, the MITF is by no means exceptional in this regard, and it is for this reason that we believe our work to be important and relevant. In light of this ongoing failure of the South African built environment it ought to be enhanced by adopting a Benjaminian critique of architecture, and as a final end, a Critical Theory of Architecture. In this regard, we refer specifically to buildings that are designed for *public* use, and using a Critical Theory of Architecture as a framework, we aim to encourage critique of South African public spaces that can inspire the development of public architecture that is emancipatory, and that maximises the freedom of its users. Finally, it is our hope that studies such as this can bring increased attention to the importance that philosophy – and specifically Critical Theory – holds for the field of architecture.

Benjamin's theory of architecture

In this section we will argue that Walter Benjamin developed a theory of architecture. Known for his complex analysis of social phenomena, his analysis of architecture – which is scattered throughout various works – is equally prolific. These works include Benjamín's collection of essays on Naples, Moscow, and Marseille (1978), as well as his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project* (2002). According to Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Benjamin and Rice 2007: 471),[4] Benjamin's theory of architecture proposes that architecture has to meet two core criteria: firstly, it has to act as a 'cultural sign', and secondly, it has to have a 'material presence'.

Since Benjamin's critique of architecture is fragmented over several texts, our research utilises two main texts to extract his theory of architecture. The first of these is his unfinished *The Arcades Project* (2002) (originally titled *Das Passagen-Werk*) (Benjamin 1982), which was the product of research conducted by Benjamin in Paris on the city's arcades, or *les passages*. For Benjamin, the arcades were the "most important architectural form of the nineteenth century" (Benjamin 2002: ix); consequently, he analysed these architectural forms in terms of the "philosophical, economic, political and

3 In this context, the 'failure' of a public building refers to its inability to function, as asserted by Benjamin, as a cultural sign and a positive material presence.

4 We note the confusion caused by using the work of both Andrew Benjamin and Walter Benjamin as sources.

technological" phenomena that gave rise to them (Benjamin 2002: ix), as well as the interplay between these phenomena.

The second text we utilise is Benjamin's collection of essays, *Reflections* (1978). Specifically, we make use of the second part of *Reflections*, 'Moscow, Marseilles, Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century' and 'Naples', which constitutes an analysis of the experience of public space in these cities. Benjamin emphasises that each city is different, and that the built space is a reflection of not only its culture, but also its socio-economic circumstances. He furthermore describes the interplay between the philosophical, the economic, the political, and the technological (Benjamin 2002: ix) as that which makes for a rich and complex analysis of the built environment.

Complementary to our use of these two works of Benjamin are several secondary texts. The first is *Walter Benjamin and Architecture: Introduction* (2007) by Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, as well as *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* (2009) by the same authors. Additionally, we make use of Andrew Benjamin's chapter, 'Porosity at the Edge: Working Through Walter Benjamin's 'Naples'', in *Walter Benjamin and Architecture* (2010), in which he interprets Benjamin's analysis of Naples. We chose these texts specifically because, as Andrew Benjamin claims, Benjamin's analysis of the built environment continues to play a fundamental role in how we "understand, evaluate and critique the complex interrelation of elements from which the architecture of modernity is constructed" (Benjamin and Rice 2009, 3).

According to Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (2007), architecture has to adhere to two main criteria. Firstly, it has to act as a "cultural sign", and secondly, it has to have a "material presence" (Benjamin and Rice 2007, 471). In our interpretation, we argue that, as a cultural sign, architecture should account for the experience, history, tradition and rituals of a society's collective psyche and institutions. Secondly, as a material presence, architecture ought to dialectically operate between form and function; in other words, the form and function of architectural structures – that is, their spatial organisation and the intention with which they were designed and constructed – should serve as a material reflection of the culture of the community within which such structures are located. Additionally, the latter criteria – the material presence of architecture – is expanded upon using a Marxist critique of materialism to demonstrate how materiality in buildings can be both concrete and abstract.

To illustrate how Benjamin used these two criteria, we first refer to his analysis of Naples (Benjamin 1978). The harmony in the Naples built environment is illustrative of the porosity of the city and its citizens, and the seamless melding together of that which is public and that which is private. Here, Benjamin observes that the individuals' (1978: 166) "private existence is the baroque opening of a heightened public sphere". This porosity – the dynamic interplay between formality and informality, and the interaction between construction and dilapidation – is reflective of the dialectical movements within the city's public and private spaces. For Benjamin, the purpose of architecture is to 'bind' a community; he notes that "the stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its 'thus and not otherwise'. This is how architecture, the most binding part of communal rhythm, comes into being" (1978: 166).

The constant change – or 'dynamism' of architecture – acts dialectically between history and the evolution of a city to create an urban culture; this is the very same culture that, for Benjamin, should be reflected in that city's architecture. As Benjamin noted in the above quotation, "no situation appears intended forever" (1978: 166); thus, architecture must, at its core, be understood as dynamic insofar as it changes and adapts alongside the historical development of culture.

A contrasting example of the role of architecture as a cultural sign can be found in Benjamin's analysis of Moscow, in particular its cafés. Benjamin (1978: 109) observes that:

> Anything that cannot be based on the collective framework demands a disproportionate expenditure of effort. For this reason there is no "homeliness". But nor are there any cafes. Free trade and the free intellect have been abolished. The cafes are thereby deprived of their public. There remain, therefore, even for private affairs, only the office and the club.

The 'interruption' of the harmony that exists between private and public spaces in Moscow is what leads to the demise of "homeliness"; in other words, the alienation of 'home' from the root of its idea. Consequently, shared spaces are 'proletarianised', and the drive for collectiveness kills the harmony that should ideally occur within the urban environment. Such a break in harmony creates architecture that does not function as a cultural sign, and instead imposes ideas that are not reflective of the society upon those who interact with it. Compare the Moscow café with Benjamin's description of the Neapolitan café: the latter

is reflective of the culture of Naples, while the former does not represent the socio-cultural context. Thus, architecture that acts as a cultural sign operates dialectically insofar as it is simultaneously a representation of the city's culture and a producer of such culture. Thus, buildings as a cultural sign both emanate and reflect culture.

Equally important, according to Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (2007), is the characteristic of architecture as having a material presence. The 'material presence' of architecture refers to the dialectic relationship between the form and function of a building. In this context, 'form' refers to the 'style' – or physical appearance – of the building, while the 'function' of a building is simultaneously the intention with which it was designed, and its spatial organisation. Form and function are brought together by 'typology', which designates the specific category to which a building belongs. A building with a specific typology is designed with a specific intention – or function – which has an impact on the spatial organisation and physical appearance – or form – of the building. In a Benjaminian context, the Neapolitan café has a specific typology that determines both its form – as a space with dynamic, permeable borders – and its function as a social, shared space.

Function – as both spatial organisation and as intention – can be divided into two categories. The first is the 'overt function' of a building, which refers to its internal and external organisation. In this context, the word function can be understood in the context of the modernist maxim "form follows function" (Roth 2007: 542), which determines that the 'floorplan' of a space – such as the Neapolitan café – is arranged in a specific way to accommodate the purpose of such a space. Simultaneously, architecture can be understood in terms of its 'covert function', which comes about explicitly as a consequence of the building's typology, and implicitly as a result of the socio-economic or material[5] context within which a building is situated.

There is a dialectical relationship between the overt and covert functions of a building: for instance, the Neapolitan café is overtly arranged to accommodate the function of a café, while simultaneously being located within a context in which the general populace have a need for such a space, and the owners

5 'Material' in this sense is to be understood in its Marxist conceptualisation as the concrete economic relations in society. We derive this understanding from Marx's conception of *Historical Materialism* which maintains that it is the material conditions of society, such as modes of production, that form the foundation of its social structure (Singer 2000).

of these cafés have a desire to profit from this need. When a conflict arises between the overt and covert functions of a building, the resulting contradiction creates an oppressive space.

A contradiction – and subsequent oppression – arises when the overt function of a building comes into conflict with the covert function of a capitalist society. This is best exemplified by Benjamin's analysis of the arcades in Paris, specifically the conflict that arose between the social – or communal – function of the arcades, and the capitalist imperative that they encouraged. For Benjamin, such overt and covert functions are also evident in the 'implicit' and 'explicit' characteristics of the urban setting: "Not only does this provide a way of approaching the implicit and explicit urbanism of these buildings – the implicit is the building's inherent urbanism, the explicit way that urban presence may be an intentional part of the building's structure" (Benjamin 2006: 94).

The overt function of the arcade was to serve as a cover for the spaces between buildings under which communal markets existed. Traditionally made from iron girders and glass, these arcades served as a tourist attraction, and they facilitated the socialising of local Parisians in any weather conditions. However, these market spaces became increasingly decadent, and consequently came to reflect not the shared, social nature of their original function, but rather of the opulence of commerce (Benjamin 1987: 146).

Central to the overt and covert functions of individual architectural objects is the socio-economic context – in a Marxist sense – within which these architectural objects are located. For example, modern capitalism is central to many contemporary societies, and thus, this will be reflected in the architecture of such societies. Consequently, if the overt function of a building is that of a shared, social space, such a building will simultaneously and inevitably reflect the covert capitalist imperative that lies at the core of contemporary culture. Benjamin (1987: 157) notes that:

> This happens here through the ambiguity attending the social relationships and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill … [which] is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both houses and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one.

This speaks to the dynamism of architecture: the process whereby buildings with a clear, overt function can simultaneously take on covert functions as a

consequence of the specific socio-economic systems in the context, and how this can give rise to the contradictions that result in oppression.

At this juncture, it is necessary to comment on architecture's ability to 'alienate' and 'reify'. It is possible to understand Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (2002) from the perspective of Marxist analysis, specifically the notion of 'alienation', which is clearly addressed in Benjamin's analysis of architecture (Frisby 2001: 28). In the case of the Paris arcades, Benjamin describes, as mentioned earlier, the mechanism whereby a social, shared space can become a vehicle for opulence and consumerism. In such cases, it is our assertion that buildings can bring about alienation and come to act as a reifying force.

In this context, the Marxist concepts of 'alienation' and 'reification' are central to our understanding of how labour is robbed of its meaning and purpose (Bronner 2011: 5), and furthermore, how the individual becomes, as Stephen Bronner puts it, a "cog in the machine" (2011: 5). For example, the worker becomes alienated from the communal market when the market is formalised. In such an instance, the capitalist imperative becomes reflected in the built space occupied by the market, thereby simultaneously alienating the market from its original purpose and reifying the patron of the market. By this logic, buildings can be oppressive when they bring about reification within the capitalist system. In the case of the market, the alienation of this space from its original function transforms it into a mechanism for reification: the trader who sells their produce at the now-capitalist market has become just another cog in the system; and instead of partaking in the shared, social nature that was the original function of the market, such a trader is purely there for the purposes of creating surplus value and profit. This exemplifies the contradiction in the market as simultaneously a social space and a mechanism for reification.

In addition to a Benjaminian understanding of form and function in architecture, it is also necessary to describe his perspective, the notion of 'materiality'. In a most superficial sense, materiality refers to the tangible building materials used to construct an architectural object. Such 'concrete materiality' of a building is closely related to both its form and function, as the typology of a structure will determine, to a great extent, the materials used to construct it. However, it is also necessary to account for the 'abstract materiality' of a tangible building material. For Benjamin (1978), such abstract materiality is exemplified by the shift from wood and stone to glass and iron to construct the arcades. This shift marked an abstract change that was

brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Benjamin 1978: 147) that can best be understood from a Marxist perspective of the socio-economic context of Paris at the time. To quote Benjamin: "Just as Napoleon failed to recognize the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, neither did the master builders of his time perceive the functional nature of iron, through which the constructive principle began its domination of architecture" (1978: 147).

In a concrete sense, the introduction of iron into the built environment and its subsequent importance for the built environment forever changed the face of architecture. Simultaneously, in an abstract sense (and from the perspective of a Marxist critique of materialism), the use of iron as a new form of building technology should be understood not as an attempt to liberate society or improve the quality of construction, but as a way to reduce construction costs. In a capitalist context, the use of iron is therefore a mechanism whereby profits can be increased. However, at the same time, the strength and rigidity of iron reduces the potential for the creation of dynamic architecture of the kind that Benjamin observed in Naples. Architecture that fails to be dynamic can no longer be reflective of a culture, and therefore ceases to function as a cultural sign. Consequently, such architecture – as understood in terms of a building's abstract materiality – has the potential to become oppressive.

In this section, we argue that, although Benjamin's writings on architecture were scattered throughout his oeuvre, it is nevertheless possible to devise a Benjaminian critique of architecture. According to Benjamin (Benjamin and Rice 2007), architecture has to function as a cultural sign and material presence. In order to do justice to the work of Benjamin, it is necessary to apply Benjamin's theory of architecture to existing structures. In the following section of the paper, we aim to, firstly, place Benjamin's work within the context of contemporary architecture and economic practices in the South African built environment, and secondly, to demonstrate the relevance of capitalism and modernity to this context. Finally, we apply the Benjaminian critique of architecture outlined above to the MITF in Bloemfontein's CBD, and subsequently use this framework to develop a critique of the building.

A practical application of Benjamin's theory of architecture to the Mangaung Intermodal Transport Facility (MITF)

In this section, we apply the critique we developed using Benjamin's theory of architecture to the claim that architecture should function as a cultural sign and material presence (Benjamin and Rice 2007: 471-475). Additionally, we demonstrate how, using Benjamin's critique, South African public infrastructure fails in this regard, thereby creating oppressive buildings. By way of illustration, we refer to the MITF in our analysis, and its functioning as a cultural sign and material presence, as well as the expression of form, overt and covert functions, and abstract and concrete materiality. While we recognise that these categories overlap to a large degree, it is necessary to separate them for the purposes of analysis.

At this juncture, it is necessary to comment on the contextual relevance of Benjamin's work. A central characteristic of our proposed Critical Theory of Architecture – as applied in South Africa – is that it is reflective of the culture of both the country and the Global South.[6] It is important to note that, by using his work, we do not intend to impose contextually irrelevant and inappropriate perspectives on the built environment, thereby promoting the skewed power relations that have historically characterised Africa's relationship with the West. Furthermore, as we aim to demonstrate in this paper, Benjamin's own emphasis on creating architecture that is culturally reflective makes his work applicable to any context, provided it is applied in a way that accounts for the nuances of a given culture. Thus, this characteristic of Benjamin's work ensures that any descriptive or normative critique that stems from it is in itself a reflection of the culture at hand.

Modernity and capitalism in contemporary South African architecture

Although Benjamin was not alive during the Modern Era, his theories about architecture nevertheless pre-empted many of the criticisms that were later levelled at modern architecture. For him, the arcades were the material manifestation of the internal contradiction that exists in modernity: in one respect, Benjamin grieved the loss of the traditional, and in another, he professed excitement about the opportunities presented by new building

6 Benjamin's work is appropriate because he wrote about built space in the African context, especially the African 'kraal' and its function as a utopian urban space (Benjamin 2002).

technology and construction techniques (Morton 2006: 359-363). Benjamin also noted the internal contradiction that exists between the beauty of architectural objects and their ability to materially demonstrate reification and commodification in society (Morton 2006: 359-363). For Benjamin, architecture serves as a "witness" to the "latent mythology" (Benjamin 1982: 7) of a society – and in the society Benjamin found himself, such mythology constituted "the illusion of 'progress' under capitalism" (Morton 2006: 359). A century later, little has changed. Most contemporary societies continue to be characterised by the 'mythology' of progress and capitalism (George 1999: online), and, just as the arcades of Paris were reflective of the culture of 19th-century France, so too can contemporary architecture bear witness to this fact.

From the spirit of modernity rose modern architecture (dubbed the "International Style" or "International Modernism" (Roth 2007: 568, 571)), which was intended as a universal style free of any cultural, historical, symbolic, and contextual references, and that could therefore be applied globally (Roth 2007: 159-617). From Modern architecture arose "brutalism" (Roth 2007: 603) – from the French *béton brut*– which translates to "raw concrete" or "bare concrete" (Phaidon eds. 2020: 6). Brutalist architecture is characterised by monumental concrete construction with rough finishes and unadorned facades (Banham 1966). Some of the most famous examples of South African brutalist buildings include Ponte City in Johannesburg, the Johannesburg Civic Centre, the Nedbank Building in Durban (Phaidon eds. 2020: 6), and the University of Johannesburg. Despite being criticised for its stark and cold nature and its failure to adapt to local climates, brutalist architecture remains popular, and is particularly prominent in institutional buildings (Imani and Imani 2021: 1-5).

As it turned out, modern architecture awoke ongoing contention and controversy, and sparked severe criticism (Roth 2007: 159-617, Popova 2004: 1-11). Foremost among these is the assertion that modernism, as an *international* style, attempts to homogenise and sanitise the art of building, and further fails to account for physical and social context. In other words, modern architecture fails to function as a *cultural sign* (Benjamin and Rice 2007: 471-475). Additionally, the *material presence* (in other words, the dialectic relationship between the form and function of a building) of contemporary architecture – as demonstrated below – is testament to the ongoing and homogenous spirit of neoliberal capitalism that governs the majority of the world. Several decades later, the principles – and more importantly, the spirit – underlying modern architecture continue to inform, to a large extent,

contemporary architecture and urban planning in many parts of the world, including South Africa.

For many South Africans, the phrases 'public architecture' and 'white elephants'[7] have become nearly synonymous, and many long-awaited and publicly lauded projects – such as the MITF – have all, for the most part, been abandoned, vandalised, or both (Delport 2018: online, Motse 2018: online, Malesele 2022: online, Kuljian 2009: 450-464, Chabalala 2022: online). The tragedy of such buildings is that they fail on several accounts: they fail to live up to the benefits promised by their creators, they fail to represent the culture, history, experiences, and traditions of their users, and most importantly, they fail to improve the lives of urban communities. The consequences of these failures are that urban communities are torn apart, marginalised, and ultimately oppressed through the mechanism of architecture.

In recent years, "formalising the informal" (Joubert 2009) has become a popular phrase in South African architectural circles. This maxim is aimed at South Africa's vibrant and thriving informal economy – an aspect of South African culture that has not only come to characterise many of the country's urban areas (Etim and Daramola 2020: 134-160), but also contributes 15-18% to the South African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Hamilton 2020: online). Urban informality is simultaneously the source of vibrance – bustling streets, blaring music, and pavements teeming with food and other wares – and urban problems such as congestion, pollution, crime, and infrastructural overload (Willemse 2011: 7-15). It is on account of the latter that many local municipalities, architects, and urban planners have taken it upon themselves to formalise the informal economy through the design and construction of public architecture (Joubert 2009).

One of the most notorious examples of a formalising project in South Africa is the MITF in Bloemfontein (Truspace 2018: online) (*Figure 1*). Intended to simultaneously formalise the CBD's informal trading sector and taxi rank and resolve the city's myriad transportation issues,[8] the building has become a

7 'White elephants' is a common phrase used in the architectural and urban planning disciplines to describe a building that has been abandoned by its users on account of it being unable to meet the needs of said users.

8 These issues stem from a number of events, most notably the apartheid regime's mode of city planning – which focused primarily on removing marginalised communities to outlying areas situated far from the urban core (Strauss 2019: 135-168, Du Plessis 2013: 69-88) – and the current failure of the public transportation systems in South Africa (Joubert 2009).

white elephant and crime hub that has had a drastic impact upon the lives of those living and working in the city (Delport 2018: online, Malesele 2022: online, Masuabi 2022: online). Situated in the former suburb of Waaihoek, the MITF is simultaneously a monument – in a concrete and abstract sense – to the city's apartheid legacy and a bastion of modern architecture that fails to account for the local traditions, rituals, history, and experience that constitute the city's culture. Additionally, the building is exemplary of the contradictions that exist between the overt and covert functions of architecture in a capitalist society, and the oppression that results from such contradictions.

Figure 1: The MITF

Source: Otto 2015: photo

Benjamin in Bloemfontein: the Mangaung Intermodal Transport Facility

Having detailed the contemporary reality of public infrastructure in South Africa, we now proceed to the analysis of the MITF using, as we have argued, Benjamin's theory of architecture. In this analysis, we pay specific attention to the building's function as a cultural sign and a material presence in the city. As

in many South African cities, the CBD of Bloemfontein is a bustling, vibrant place (Potgieter and Steyn 2007). At the city's northern border, an informal market stretches along the length of Peet Street (*Figure 2*). However, this market comes to a sudden stop at the end of the street, where the shadow of the multi-storey MITF begins. To the left of the MITF is a shopping centre – Central Park Shopping Mall – and to its right, a railway line. In the distance, on the southern border of the CBD, two cooling towers loom ominously over the city.

Ostensibly, the objective of the MITF was to formalise Peet Street's informal economy by incorporating the existing informal taxi rank into the public transport system, and by creating an indoor space for street traders to sell their wares (Truspace 2018: online). In reality, however, the building failed miserably in these goals: it was abandoned by the community, and has subsequently became a crime hub (Delport 2018, Masuabi 2022, Malesele 2022). In the analysis below, we aim to demonstrate that the MITF – and the many public buildings that are similar to the MITF – fail to meet the requirements of the liberated theory of architecture that Benjamin advocated for.

Figure 2: The location of the MITF relative to the cooling towers (in yellow) and the railway line (in purple).

Source: Google Earth 2023: map view; edited by Otto 2023.

The MITF as a cultural sign

In order to investigate the MITF as a *cultural sign*, it is first necessary to briefly review the history of the CBD. In 1918, the suburb of Waaihoek – located where the CBD currently is – was demolished, and its black and coloured residents were forcibly removed to a more remote 'location' known as Batho (Du Bruyn and Oelofse 2019: 47-81). The removal of Waaihoek's residents was justified by the government's assertion that the land was needed for a new power station and cooling towers, the structures of which remain intact today. Additionally, a railway line was constructed to create a physical barrier between the white section of the CBD and Batho. The forced removal of black and coloured South Africans, combined with the segregatory urban planning practices that followed this event, characterises the history of the CBD as one of oppression and marginalisation.

We begin this section of the analysis by arguing that the MITF *does* function as a cultural sign. In fact, most architecture – by dint of being produced by human beings with their own individual cultures, experiences, and traditions – is reflective of *something*. However, whether that cultural sign has any relevance to the social, political, and economic context of the architectural object at hand is an altogether different question. Thus, while the MITF is *a* cultural sign, the culture it reflects is not necessarily that of the community of the CBD. Consequently, the MITF fails to act as a liberatory space, and instead can be characterised as an oppressive building that is alien in the context.

The MITF reflects the marginalising history of the CBD in various ways: its disproportionate scale and unrestrained use of cold, hard materials directly corresponds to that of the colossal, concrete cooling towers (*Figure 3*) that were first constructed to justify the forced removal of the residents of Waaihoek. Furthermore, the location of the MITF is such that it is in constant 'conversation' with the cooling towers: two immense, looming structures facing each other across a north-south axis as they tower over the rest of the city. Thus, the MITF is not just a reflection of the oppressive history of the CBD – it is a *celebration* thereof (Truspace 2018: online). Consequently, while going about their everyday lives, the inhabitants of the CBD are reminded of a segregatory and discriminatory past by the MITF in its capacity as a cultural sign.

Figure 3: The cooling towers.

Source: Otto 2015: photo

As for the rituals, traditions, and experiences that the MITF as a cultural sign is supposed to express, these are blatantly disregarded. Most prominent are those associated with the informal economy, in particular its open and organic nature (Chonghaile 2017: online). By dint of being located outside under temporary, makeshift structures, urban informality is dynamic and permeable (*Figure 4*). As for the rest of the CBD, this dynamism and permeability is displayed by vendors reposing outside their shops, and the patrons of shebeens, cafés, and tuck shops occupying the pavements. The rituals and traditions of the city are very much in keeping with the permeable borders of Benjamin's (1978) Neapolitan cafés. However, like the cafés of Moscow, the interior of the MITF is isolated from the outside, and there is a clear separation between public and private space. In other words, the dynamism of the city is interrupted, and the 'homeliness' (Benjamin 1978) that characterises the CBD is lost.

Figure 4: The permeable and dynamic nature of the informal economy.

Source: Otto 2015: photo

By forcing the informal traders of Peet Street to trade indoors and consequently disconnecting them from the rest of the city, the MITF interrupts the dynamism that is such a core characteristic of not only the informal economy, but of South African cities in general. Not unlike the cafés of Moscow, the building simultaneously lacks 'homeliness', while the traders have been "deprived of their public" (Benjamin 1978: 109). The absence of porosity creates a distinct division between that which is private and that which is public, and the seamless melding of these spaces – as seen in Benjamin's analysis of the cafés in Naples – is lost. Furthermore, the expectation that informal traders should formalise their activities, predominantly by moving such activities indoors and becoming confined to single spaces in unchangeable locations, further interrupts the traditions and rituals of the city and the dynamism of urban space, as identified by Benjamin.

As for the physical structure of the MITF, the building metaphorically 'turns its back' on the informal activities that characterise Peet Street, and is instead orientated such that its main entrances face the Central Park Shopping Mall. In keeping with Benjamin's description of public spaces in Moscow, this orientation disrupts the harmony of the urban environment and further contributes to the demise of homeliness. Additionally, the façade of the MITF facing Peet Street displays predominantly service ducts and parking bays (*Figure 5*), thereby displaying indifference to, and disregard for, the traditions and rituals of the CBD in a very tangible way. Unlike the Neapolitan cafés, the MITF is not reflective of its society; rather, the building – as a cultural sign – contradicts the vibrant and inviting urban culture of South African cities.

Figure 5: The closed-off nature of the MITF.

Source: Google Earth 2023: street view; edited by Otto 2023

The loss of dynamism that the MITF brings about is also in conflict with the experience – both present and future – of those living and working in the city. The informal economy is, by definition, dynamic insofar as it changes with the development and evolution of culture. Traders change location and products depending on where their clientele is and what their needs are, and the structures built by such traders can be changed depending on the location of their stalls, and the nature of the weather. In contrast, the MITF is static and unable to change as the city inevitably does. One could argue that most architecture is static, in particular large buildings constructed with strong materials such as concrete and brick. However, what makes the MITF moribund is not just its physical construction, but also the institutionalisation – in other words, subsuming what was once an organic characteristic of the urban environment under the umbrella of local governance – of the rituals and rhythms of the city. In these ways, the building fails to function as a contextually relevant cultural sign, because it is a celebration of a segregatory history, and it does not account for the rituals and experiences of its users.

Architecture and material presence

Material presence is expressed as form and function. With regard to form, the MITF was largely inspired by brutalist architecture (Truspace 2018: online), which accounts for its domineering presence in the CBD and the stark nature of its appearance. The building is therefore demonstrative of monumentality and homogeneity that not only contrasts dramatically with the surrounding aesthetic context of the building, but is also reflective of an imposing, institutional style of architecture that has been favoured by several oppressive

political regimes, including the apartheid government. Additionally, the monumentality and extensive use of concrete of the brutalist nature of the MITF furthers the dialogue that exists between this building and the cooling towers.

a. Overt and covert function, and contradictions

With regard to the *overt function*, the MITF is arranged such that it contains all functions within a closed structure, thereby isolating the users of the building from the rest of the city. This is in direct contrast to the architecture that surrounds the MITF, thus rendering the material presence of this building one that is inappropriate for, and irrelevant to, the built context of the CBD. Furthermore, the interior arrangement of the building allows for surveillance – not unlike the panopticon of Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault – of informal traders by those working in more formal office spaces. As a consequence, the subject – in other words, the informal traders – becomes the object, and becomes reified "through concepts that have been ripped from their historical context" (Bronner 2011: 4). Additionally, the encroachment of one space upon another – that is, the office spaces upon the trading spaces – alienates informal traders from their environment.

As for the *covert function* of the MITF – in other words, the intention with which the building was designed – it is first necessary to discuss the typology of the MITF. Although a relatively new category of architecture in South Africa, public projects that aim to 'formalise' informal activities in cities do so with the ostensible aim of resolving urban problems such as congestion, pollution, infrastructure overload, and crime. However, what is implicit to this typology is the potential for local municipalities to earn an income from formerly informal activities through rent and taxation. Although not always the case, informal traders and taxi operators are often expected to pay rent for the use of a building such as the MITF; simultaneously, no alternative is made available to them. By formalising what is informal and introducing taxation into the economic landscape, urban populations are reified and turned into sources of income for local governments using the mechanism of architecture. Thus, a contradiction exists in the covert function of the building – a conflict between improving the lives of those working in the informal economy and adding to their financial burdens – thereby rendering the building oppressive.

A further contradiction exists between the overt and covert functions of the MITF: while designed to serve as a shared, social space (albeit one that isolates its users from the rest of the city), the building simultaneously promotes a spirit

of consumerism. Not unlike the arcades of Paris (Benjamin 2002), that which brings the people of the city together is simultaneously the mechanism whereby capitalism is promoted. Considering the dialectical relationship that exists between the overt and covert functions of both the arcades and the MITF, this contradiction gives rise to a conflict, which in turn brings about an oppressive structure that is contrary to what the material presence of architecture ought to be. When viewed in this critical light, what appears to be a social function is a mechanism whereby the people of the CBD are reified and alienated, and the MITF is simultaneously reflective of existing oppression and the mechanism whereby oppression is maintained and promoted.

b. Material form and concrete and abstract materiality

The material form of the MITF is inspired by brutalism. With regard to its *concrete materiality*, the concrete construction of the building adds to its large scale and dominating presence in the city; additionally, the materials used also contribute to the cold, uninviting appearance of the building. Insofar as *abstract materiality* is concerned, these materials have no relevance to the context, and are indifferent to the cultural heritage of the city. Instead, such materials are a reflection of the cooling towers, and therefore reminiscent of the oppressive and discriminatory past of both the CBD and the country. Additionally, the use of concrete is a celebration of an architecture once favoured by the apartheid government. This uncritical adoption of forms of architecture by the South African government post-apartheid serves to uphold the legacy of the oppressive form of brutalist public buildings in urban communities. Furthermore, given that concrete is simultaneously a cheaper construction material to use, and partly to blame for the ecological crisis faced by the world, the abstract materiality of the MITF is one that promotes the capitalist imperative. Thus, as a consequence of its material presence, the MITF can be deemed an oppressive structure in the CBD.

In the above analysis, we demonstrate that the MITF is oppressive for various reasons: as a cultural sign, the building is reflective of a discriminatory past, and fails to account for the rituals, traditions, experience, and history of the people of the CBD. Simultaneously, as a material presence, the contradictions that exist in the MITF – predominantly those that arise between its overt and covert functions – give rise to conflicts in the architecture of the building, which in turn makes the structure one that oppresses its users. Finally, the concrete and abstract materiality of the MITF serves to uphold a legacy of oppressive architecture in South Africa.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that despite the scattered nature of Benjamin's writings, there exists a Benjaminian theory of architecture, and furthermore, that this theory can be used to analyse public architecture in South Africa. Using Benjamin's work, we develop a framework that can be used to critique architecture. By referring to the work of Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (2007), we identify two main criteria that ought to be considered when critiquing architecture: architecture as cultural sign, and architecture as having a material presence, each with its own subcategories. Additionally, we demonstrate that contradictions between these different categories can render an architectural object oppressive.

In the second section of this paper, we apply our Benjaminian framework to the MITF as an example of architecture in the South African context. We firstly demonstrate how public architecture in South Africa can be regarded as oppressive from the perspective of Benjamin's theory of architecture, and we illustrate that the MITF, in failing to function as a cultural sign and material presence (in a Benjaminian sense), is an oppressive structure. Thus, although the aim of this building is to satisfy a social need, its existence inevitably leads to the promulgation of a multiplicity of oppressive capitalist structures. Secondly, by studying the reception of the MITF as well as the consequences of its inclusion in the urban fabric of the CBD, we demonstrate that the failure of buildings such as the MITF is not isolated to this particular project, but is instead the result of a larger problem within the South African built environment, specifically public infrastructure.

While we are confident that Benjamin's work can continue to shed light on the problem of failed public architecture in the South African built environment, we are necessarily limited by the scope of this paper. Firstly, we lack the space to explore architecture in other parts of the Global South, and furthermore, to do a comparative study of such architecture. Additionally, while we acknowledge that it would have been useful to supplement our Benjaminian framework with the work of theorists from the Global South, no such work (to our knowledge) has been done. Finally, while Benjamin wrote prolifically on architecture, his work was scattered across several writings. Thus, it is necessary to draw on secondary texts in order to develop a cohesive framework for critiquing architecture.

In future work, we hope to undertake the comparative study mentioned above by investigating architecture in other cultures in the Global South. Furthermore, we aim to complete our project – that is, creating a Critical Theory of Architecture – by addressing emancipatory praxis as the third criteria of Critical Theory. Moreover, while this paper focuses exclusively on public architecture intended to formalise informal spaces, we also intend to apply this model to other typologies. It is our belief that studies such as this can pave the way to creating a successful built environment by firstly highlighting the importance of philosophy – and specifically Critical Theory – for the field of architecture; and secondly, by indicating what needs to be done in order to create an architecture that is reflective of both the cultural values and material needs of a community.

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