
Hannah le Roux

ACUPUNCTURING JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah le Roux is an architect in Johannesburg and Senior Lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has documented Modernist architecture in Ghana, Nigeria, and on the Witwatersrand, but her real interest is in the capacity of the forms of Modernism to frame spatial strategies in times of social change. As co-curator for the South African pavilion for the 11th International Exhibition of Architecture at the Venice Biennale, she is looking at how the (roughly) 60 x 100 metre soccer pitch is the locus for multiple claims, contestations and moves in the remaking of South African space.

COLLABORATORS

Urban Fabrics: Katharina Rohde, Eric Linderberg, Rasty, Sian Fisher.

KwaThema Project: Tseleng Phala, Rat Western, Catherine da Souza.

urbanrecycling Hillbrow: Fabio Vanin, Stephen Hobbs, Gareth Tresling, Andrew Bell, Brandon Gassner, Dana Fayman.

→ **Acupuncture could be seen** as a metaphor for a way of working on the city by identifying both the points at which the flows of people and processes cohere, as well as those where obstacles – bureaucratic, legal, spatial and social barriers – block their realisation and create tension and malaise. Our way of working tries to work in a way that is open to, and non-judgmental of those urban practices that might be dismissed as illegal or foreign to official, planned visions of the city's future. We try to illustrate the potentialities of these moments, even momentarily, through design, representation and construction, as a way to create imaginative shifts in collective understandings of Johannesburg. This essay documents this process with images drawn from three projects.

Borrowing a term put forward by Mexican architect Teddy Cruz to describe his approach to inserting socially responsive architecture into the city, I narrate the approaches taken in three architecture studios at the University of the Witwatersrand: Urban Fabrics (eastern Central Business District, 2006), the KwaThema Project (2007), and urbanrecycling (Hillbrow, 2008). In each case, I have, along with my colleagues, conceived of the architecture studio situation as a way of collectively exploring under-documented practices and places in the city and as a way of making tiny but strategically real changes by engaging with them.



fig1 URBAN studio
Mural art by Rasty,
2006
Author's photograph

The term urban acupuncture¹ has been borrowed to describe how we work. Our work is expressed in situations and spaces created in three architectural design studios at the University of the Witwatersrand: Urban Fabrics (eastern Central Business District, 2006), the KwaThema Project (2007), and urbanrecycling (Hillbrow, 2008). The architecture studio situation is a way of collectively exploring under-documented practices and places in the city, as well as realising tiny but strategic projects. The task that each project addresses is to realise something with a small budget, in a limited period of time. Located halfway between architecture or urban design and public art or performance, the projects come close to public art in their scale, but do not address themselves to an arts audience. They are rather urban prototypes of a kind.

Our way of addressing each context is to try to work in a way that is open to, and non-judgemental of spatial practices that might be dismissed as illegal or foreign in terms of official, planned visions of the city's future. We try to illustrate the potentialities of these moments, even if only momentarily, through design, representation and construction, as a way to create vivid imaginative shifts in collective understandings of Johannesburg.

Acupuncture is a metaphor for a way of working on the city through mapping the intensities of flows of people and processes, identifying nodes where obstacles – bureaucratic, legal, spatial, and social – block their realisation and create tension and malaise. On a large scale, this could describe how recent readings of the city and inclusive planning approaches converge. As Jennifer Robinson (1998), AbdouMaliq Simone and Graeme Gotz (2001), Edgar Pieterse and Frank Meintjies (2004) and Tanja Winkler (2006) have documented and theorised, the agency of everyday users can transform the city to a more socially fluid and multiple space. Yet, although the rhetoric of post-apartheid city governments suggests that the will for inclusiveness does exist, the dominance of planning and design techniques based in Modernist and uniform contexts often blocks the realisation of multiplicity.

In these dominant approaches, drawn from modern space-making, designers use techniques of zoning,

clearing, and standardising space and smoothing circulation, which assume an organised and uniform body public. Each citizen's needs are fragmented into functional categories, and their fulfillment can only be met through their movement across the city. Full participation in the city is thus limited to those who are capable of movement, and whose age, gender, race and economic status allows them access to its fullness.

This kind of space is in contrast to the kind of accessible yet multiple localised space that can be found in descriptions of most pre-modern or non-western sites, as well as in futuristic imaginings of potentially richer virtual worlds. An ideal for the city, whether this city gives rights to its users, or allows heterotopia, suggests a space where everyday richness can co-exist with wealth and access, within the density of urban fabric.

The studios take the view that the city is not without its own solutions, but that often their recognition as valuable spatial practices is blocked by the way the city is produced and managed. To align with the ways the city is produced by its users requires a shift in practice, the introduction of complementary therapies, rather than deepening the production of fragmented space.

Our approach becomes one of demonstration, of framing the city's existing capacities for creative spatial change. We believe that one can enter an area with minimal resources and work with its energies to produce a temporary release of its latent possibilities. The role of the studios is not to sustain this opening, much as we believe in its potentiality. We accept the temporal nature of our work and hence of the proposals we construct, as much as we believe in their imaginative power.

The Urban Fabrics project worked with found spaces and materials in an area of downtown Johannesburg to create settings for a series of events that were presented on a single Saturday morning. Although the project did not directly address the Johannesburg Development Agency's proposal to reinvent the area known as the Fashion District, effectively introducing national mall-based retailers into an area that had longstanding family-owned shops, the project space can be read as an alternate view of the area's development.



fig 2



fig 3



fig 4

fig 2 The KwaThema Project, site meeting, 2007. Author's photograph

fig 3 Hillbrow urbanrecycling, site visit, 2008. Photograph by Andrew Bell

fig 4 URBAN studio, montage of proposed fashion show, 2006. Photograph by Eric Lindenberg

fig 5 URBAN studio, montage of proposed outdoor restaurant, 2006. Photograph by Sian Fisher



fig 5

In the KwaThema Project, a grant awarded by the International Design Forum allowed us to realise seven small spatial interventions within public space in an archetypal modernist black township. We developed the design briefs by following the cues of how local residents appropriate and clear neglected open space. At the site of a vandalised former beer hall, we secured the stability of the structure and framed – with red lines on and around surfaces for play, viewing and display – different possibilities for the youth to use the space for recreation. A music video and a bash, organised without our involvement, followed the launch. At the Chess Park, we realised the plans commissioned by Anthony Shoba, who has launched and run a chess club from a shipping container, to expand the activities into the adjacent park.

In Hillbrow, the most recent project, we worked on a range of scales in order to site public art interventions.

Each studio deals with unique sets of forces. The density, accessibility, use and ownership of each context is different, and so there is no specific scheme of working. The process is also open to different collaborative arrangements and is always altered and enriched by the team's background. The commonality between studios is the way of working between a form of research and a form of practice, limiting neither but blurring the clarity of either position.

Aware of our position as outsiders, through the independent resources we bring to each project, and our ability to disengage from the situation, we still work to locate ourselves closer to the existing social and economic context than is the norm for our profession. In the Fashion District we worked from a space in the area that was lent to us. In KwaThema, we realised a design that had been commissioned by a local resident.

As we intend to realise projects, the materiality of the city becomes an important aspect of our research and proposals. In this way, the studios are very different in their scope, from urban research carried out for publication or policy alone. For economic and ethical reasons, the projects produced by the studio try to work with locally sourced technologies and materials: in the Fashion District, fabrics and recycled objects from the area; in KwaThema, basic technologies of oxide and cement screed and welded steel, and in projects on all three sites, beer crates are re-appropriated from the urban everyday to become the building blocks for new forms. As we do this, we uncover the precision and variety of material ways in which the city is remade. In KwaThema, the studio participants each looked at a technique of space-making found in the township: the re-use of containers, paving, tree planting, sign-writing, tent-hiring, and ways of using open space.



fig 6



fig 7

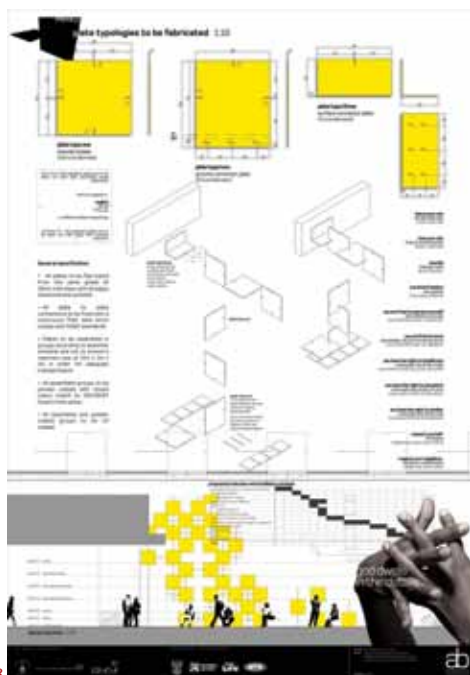


fig 8

What emerges through this form of practice-based research is a model for the way in which spaces are altered through processes of appropriation; a model that, in turn, could describe practices that would enable a more multiple and emancipatory kind of urban space. Never predictable, never repetitive, this model can be described in terms of a set of overlapping combinations.

Vacant space, often leftover 'junk' space from modern planning, is appropriated for users' needs. Often this use takes on creative forms, showing an understanding of the building as a landscape of possible uses, beyond what was originally planned at its conception.

Non-volumetric planes and angles, are created yet seldom enclosed, within the landscape of existing space. At times, these are also constructed as signs or supports for occupation.

Microelements - as a third layer, the public realm is dotted with scattered services, sound or furniture, that are always transferable, economical and necessary supports for the activities of the occupation and reuse.

The everydayness of these elements, and their presence in the African city, is reassuring. An urban strategy that positions itself around the production of inclusive situations, without removing or sterilising the life already present in the city, might be at hand.

fig 6 The KwaThema Project, seven projects, 2007. Photograph by Tom Chapman

fig 7 Hillbrow urbanrecycling, mapping of religious spaces, 2008. Photograph by Dana Fayman & Guy Aillon

fig 8 Hillbrow urbanrecycling, proposed installation at Highpoint, 2008. Photograph by Andrew Bell

fig 9 The KwaThema Project, selected participants, 2007



fig 9

Endnote

1. Teddy Cruz [O]. Available:
<http://www.residentialarchitect.com/industry-news.asp?sectionID=279&articleID=92858>
 Accessed 19 August 2008.

References

- GOTZ, G & SIMONE, A. 2001. *The Implications of Informality on Governmentality: The Case of Johannesburg in the Context of Sub-Saharan Urbanization*. Paper read at the 'Coping with informality and illegality in human settlements in developing cities' - ESF/N-AERUS Annual Workshop Conference, 23-26 May 2001, in Brussels.
- PIETERSE, E & MEINTJIES, F. (EDS). 2004. *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- JUDIN, H & VLADISLAVIĆ, I. (EDS). 1998. *blank_Architecture, Apartheid and After*. Rotterdam: NAI.
- WINKLER, T. 2006. *Kwere-Kwere Journeys into Strangeness: Re-imagining Inner-city Regeneration in Hillbrow*. PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia.