Sans Souci Cinema

SANS SOUCI CINEMA PROJECT

Kliptown Soweto, 2003-2008

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Client: Kliptown Our Town Trust

In the absence of a budget and local capacity to re-build the famous Sans Souci Cinema in Soweto, Johannesburg, the content rather than the container was realised. Through harnessing informal networks and local talent, the dramatic ruin of an old cinema formed the armature for a series of cultural events in one of Johannesburg’s poorest communities. The project set out to demonstrate that cultural production need not be limited to formal institutions and that relevant, rich and hybrid cultural identities and practices emerge from the perceived margins and interstices of the city.

Kliptown, a historic, but dilapidated township on the edge of Soweto, is the site of this project to rebuild the Sans Souci, a community cinema and theatre that burnt down in 1994. The Sans Souci, which translates literally to ‘without a care’ from the French, was established in 1948 in
a building that had previously been a dance hall and a stable. It hosted many of South Africa’s eminent performers, including Miriam Makeba, Kippie Moketzi and Abdullah Ibrahim and was one of the few cinemas where black Africans could view films during the apartheid period. After falling into disrepair in the early 1990’s, it was scavenged and disassembled by squatters looking for materials for housing.

The redevelopment of the cinema as a public, cultural and performance venue was one of the projects in a wider renewal of Kliptown as an ‘Eco Museum’ - a radical re-thinking of the traditional western museum concept in which interaction between visitors and the local community is maximised. In conceptualising the cinema, we realised that the ‘idea’ of the cinema needed to be given new meaning over time through events and incremental architectural interventions involving local people and visitors. This would be followed by a phased building process as funding became available and the community’s capacity to manage the project developed.

The project was driven by the Kliptown Our Town Trust, a community development organisation of Kliptown residents and the Vuyani Dance Theatre Company. In Phase 1 of the project, film screenings, film and dance festivals, audience development, dance training and film production allowed residents and visitors to actively participate in excavating and remembering the history of Kliptown and the Sans Souci and constructing its future.

We engaged in this process both as facilitators and as designers. We feel that direct social engagement by professionals has great relevance to the creation of urbanity in conditions of scarce resources. Top down planning has often resulted in obsolete cultural institutions and unused buildings, while viable, small scale cultural organisations struggle to survive. In our view, consolidating and developing creative social networks and practices in public space is as important as building buildings.

The notion of public space in Johannesburg, as in many other cities, is becoming increasingly
franchised and controlled on the one hand and neglected on the other. This abandonment of public space offered us ground to experiment. By harnessing the directness and immediacy of grassroots cultural networks into the design and implementation of an architectural project, we found new ways to make positive and interactive public spaces. In so doing we were able to set the conceptual foundation for the growth of the Sans Souci into a new institution.

This approach may ultimately lead to a lighter, more flexible and responsive form of urbanism which accommodates local desires, narratives and initiatives. Rather than abandoning our clients in the light of limited budgets we have pooled human resources through combined networks in order to realise our mandate of creating a public space for cultural programme.

26’10 SOUTH ARCHITECTS WITH LINDSAY BREMNER

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