Falling Monuments, Reluctant Ruins
Colloquium on the Persistence of the Past in the Architecture and Infrastructure of Colonialism and Apartheid

University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
History Workshop / School of Architecture & Planning

Friday 23 and Saturday 24 November 2018
In traversing the stubborn landscape of formerly oppressive colonial states, we are confronted with the ambivalent ruins and seemingly innocuous buildings of the forgotten infrastructure of colonialism and apartheid. What we observe in these neglected constructions is the lingering presence of colonial history and architecture’s largely hidden yet pervasive everyday structures. The buildings are a powerful reminder of the everyday bureaucracy of colonialism and apartheid - and how this history of subjugation and planning continues to shape life in postcolonial societies. Such conflicting spatial claims continue to raise a number of haunting questions: what are we to do with these remnants? how are we to remember what happened in them? Which should remain and which dismantled? Are these vacant buildings able to serve as inspiration of battles won and adversity overcome, or offer solace? Should they be made conciliatory, exemplary or explanatory as a space for restitution and justice is sought? These spaces are fraught with incomplete resolution - as much as ambivalent reverence and nostalgia, as restoration is conflated with reconciliation. Challenges to the presence of colonial and apartheid symbols in democratic South Africa were highlighted by the #RhodesMustFall campaign. There have subsequently been animated debates about the place of apartheid names, statues and art in public spaces, with calls for their removal as an integral part of decolonization. It is in this context that the questions raised above acquires particular salience and urgency.

In this colloquium, we are seeking through a series of empirically grounded presentations to understand in what ways history and architecture could ameliorate, contest or subvert these protracted conditions in terms of social justice, land reclamation and urban rehabilitation. Looking at oppressive built environments across southern Africa and the continent, from the Albert Street Pass Office in Johannesburg, to the bull fight arena in Maputo, to Ghana’s slave castles, we are asking what is the history of such anguished places - the original haunts of repression - and subsequent positions of memory, forgetting and consideration? The postcolonial decades following the dismantling of oppressive regimes across the global south are being examined in the light of contemporary heritage and memorial projects, in which building ruins and abandoned spaces are being contested and renegotiated as sites of remembrance.
We are asking what form rehabilitation takes in mediating between disparate poles: containment and restoration of distressing sites over disbursement and dissemination of a new narratives? In what sense do these historical forms engage with the political, addressing the demands of polarizing conditions of repression and remembrance, pitting an official public remembrance against private individual experiences? We need to look at historical architectural preservation and art performance models employed as engagements with spaces still convulsive with meaning. Could these buildings and other infrastructure bear witness to the past, speaking poignantly and offering testimony to another public and time? Can participation and inclusion of a new audience decades later become a way to confront more than brick and mortar? Can their histories be expunged, or do oppressive and violent pasts continue to live in them? Should landscapes of disquiet be deserted, destroyed or adapted to accommodate the needs of the present? Can monuments ever fully be transformed? Are they best left decaying to be rendered as a ruin? Or altered and made helpless, demonstrably neglected so as to be forgotten?

In examining buildings and sites within colonial and apartheid infrastructures, we are asking in what ways these oppressive buildings retain the formal structures or social stigmas in which they had symbolically and functionally operated. A focus on state/administration buildings, public spaces, infrastructural projects, memorials and monuments will allow for an interrogation of a pressing architecture and history. This infrastructure of everyday oppression will be addressed with some of the following themes: administration, incarceration, transportation, accommodation/housing and commemoration. Even as the functions of many of these edifices has changed - perpetrators brought to justice, prisoners freed, offices closed and buildings abandoned – their history, which is still unfolding, needs to be gathered and told. The colloquium seeks to build confrontations of a conflicting history, the memories of those caught up in it (even as they moved on with their lives), and a past still seeping into the public conscience.
Organizers

Hilton Judin, Arianna Lissoni and Noor Nieftagodien

Call for Presentations and Papers

Presentations, interventions and papers are invited by historians, artists, urban planners and architects in South Africa and across Africa and the South, initially focused on the five areas of colonial infrastructure identified. We aim to publish an edited volume based on a selection of the original contributions. Please submit an abstract of the proposed paper and images. These should be sent as a pdf to hilton.judin@wits.ac.za

Timetable

30 April 2018
   Deadline for Descriptions / Abstracts (3-500 words)

31 May 2018
   Notification of Acceptance and Feedback

15 November 2018
   Submission of Summary Script / Paper (3-5,000 words)

23 / 24 November 2018
   Colloquium