

Durban a Cogent African City

Introduction by

A.I. DEL MONACO, J. LIU, Y. LUCKAN, B. TECLE MISGHINA

Durban is a modern city which expresses the complex dynamics of an African city emerging from a historically colonial foundation. This provided an interesting context for engagement of the *UNESCO Chair for Sustainable Urban Quality and Culture Notably in Africa*. The institutional agreement between the UNESCO Chair, Sapienza University of Rome and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) was formalised in the year 2013, prior to an international workshop in China and the UIA 2014 in Durban, South Africa. The focus of the Chair and the curriculum outcomes of DUT, with regard to urban culture and the evolution thereof, created a mutually opportune association, with the possibility for contribution to the UIA 2014 conference in Durban. After deliberations and the necessary paperwork, the UNESCO Chair, in Association with DUT, were granted official space on the UIA Programme for presentation at the conference. This was received with much enthusiasm, which drew further interest and participation from students and Professors of Sapienza University of Rome and Tsinghua University of Beijing in China. Further representation of academics from Manipal University in India, School of Architecture University of Florida and Hosei University in Japan added much value to the collaboration in Durban.

The city of Durban is one of the most intriguing for architects and urban designers, due to its cultural and economic diversity on the one hand and its political evolution since its colonial formalisation, apartheid influences and its post-apartheid evolution, on the other. It is a city that expresses complex narratives in architectural form and expression, seemingly chaotic, yet within and upon a cogent overall structure. Perhaps, it is that very cogency in urban structure which facilitated its complex evolution, or perhaps not. This paradox forms the crux of the studies and applied research part of this book, and which defined the sites of focus for a collaborative studio workshop.

The collaboration had two broad outcomes. Firstly, the collaborative design workshop held at DUT prior to the UIA, followed by this publication of studies and research focusing on the urban character of Durban; these define the two parts of this book. The various studies, research and thought leadership on some of the key urban challenges, characteristics and opportunities for development of the city produce varied and alternate discourses which focus the aspects of heritage, security, society, urban culture and architectural narratives. This draws the reader into a somewhat emotional engagement with complexities of the city expressed from different backgrounds, perspectives and experiences; all connected, though, by a fundamental thread of historic and political evolution of the city. Interestingly, such evolution happened over a cogent underlying urban structure which afforded various expressions over a vast and varied timescale. This is precisely what makes Durban an engaging context for research on urbanism and the evolution of urban culture. While much has been written

about the urban evolution of Durban with reference to the socio-economic changes over time, the architectural narrative as one of diversity and cultural complexity, a sort of collage on a cogent canvas, the urban structure of Durban, requires further exposure. The collaborative workshop, held at DUT from 28 July to 01 August 2014, focused on four different urban nodes of the city, which had great potential for spatial transformation through urban revitalisation. These nodes defined the sites for urban revitalisation through architectural intervention. The initial analysis of the sites was undertaken by students of DUT prior to the workshop, as part of their design studio under the facilitation of Dr Yashaen Luckan, after a briefing by Professors Lucio Barbera and Anna Irene Del Monaco in February 2014; who subsequently disseminated the data and briefed the students from Sapienza and Tsinghua University prior to the workshop.

The time allocated to the workshop was rather limited due to the imminent pressure to present at the UIA. The site visits and conceptual design presentations had to be completed and presented within a period of five days, with the added complexity of students from vastly different geographic and cultural backgrounds. It was indeed a period of intense effort, contestation, challenges, negotiation and consensus, which ultimately resulted in an amazing array of design responses which were ready on time for display at the UIA. The presentation drew much interest from the UIA attendees and the general public, which to date sparks conversation, interest and admiration. The contents of this book captures the essence of the urban character of Durban, which has evolved since the early 1900s from its colonial past to its present status as a free and democratic city, with great design potential in its quest for contextually responsive identity in the built form.

This book represents also a significant exercise of collaborative research seeing the involvement of Chinese, Italian, South African scholars and architects on city-scale design issues and comparative research topics and methodologies. The book is composed by three sections: Studies and Researches, UNESCO Field Studio 2014 in Durban, Comparative and further Studies.

The first three papers in the section *Studies and Researches* by Whelan, Marks and Erwin are precious insights by three leading scholars – sociologist-anthropologist – and professors at Durban University of Technology providing a framework and interpretations on the idea of identity, city-space, heritage, dwelling in a contested urbanity as Durban. The essay by Debbie Whelan, *Heritage and money. Contested space in a changing city*, focuses on the dramatic changed demographics and uses of the inner city and on the indigenous perception of space and the construction of identity through story, rather than an appreciation of the tangible form, space and detail so that heritage is defined in multiple ways rather than in architectural term, with respect to the changing nature of the client sector.

The study by Monique Marks, *Dreaming a suburb life where walls do not divide and fear does not design*, tries to focus on the routine security practices that suburban dwellers have developed, and how this has impacted on the buildings of ties and common personhood within suburban spaces. These are considered aspirational space, viewed as an escape from the inner city and a step up from township life; the

author compares two suburbs, Umbilo and Westville. In particular, the study explores through a relevant literature the ways in which boundaries are created, literally, around individual freestanding houses in the suburbs.

The essay *Albert Park. A world in a city block* by Kira Erwin aims to discuss some complexities in relation to Albert Park, one of the design areas of The UNESCO Chair-UIA 2014 workshop, suffering serious social and safety problems. Albert Park, an English park in the middle of a white-inhabited neighbourhood of high rise built during the Sixties, use to be an area inhabited where some apartment units have literally been abandoned by owners. Believing their initial investment, no longer worth the effort, perhaps unable to sell due to a lack of maintenance in the block, or unwilling to fix-up or pay rates these owners have absconded. Since the owner is the legally recognised authority for the property, their absence or disinterest creates opportunities for rent seeking activities from illegal owners or tenants who compound non-payment of levies and rates in the block.

Iacopo Benincampi's study on *South African Colonial Architecture and the case of Durban City Hall. An integration of different European architectural communities and culture*, proposes an in depth historical investigation on The Durban City Hall, built in the early 1900's, in classic neo-Baroque-style, a formal monumental style revealing references in the City Hall in Belfast, Ireland. While the rural houses around Durban maintained a connection with Dutch heritage tradition.

Unexpectedly the first section of the book presents the conclusions of the first paper by Debbie Whelan affirming a concept which recalls the content of Iacopo Benincampi's paper: "Celebrating space, form, feature and the innate baroque-ness of the early and mid-20th century may have more success than promoting the trope of the *Tudorbethan*".

The section *UNESCO Field Studio 2014* at UIA Durban, dedicated to the design experience held at Durban University of Technology is introduced by a comment of Martha Kohen entitled *The KEY to the Durban door From the Warwick Junction to the Waterfront UNESCO workshop 2014*. Martha Kohen together with Nancy Clark – both professors at University of Florida – were part of the final Jury of the workshop held at UIA 2014 Durban venue.

Yashaen Luckan in his essay *City to Waterfront: A metaphoric journey through space and time* recalls the metaphoric journey reconnecting the design areas of the workshop and their historical relevance to build up the hybrid identity of the city.

Anna Irene Del Monaco and Liu Jian in the paper *Re-activate "Entanglements" of Urban Memory. Durban the most African among South African Cities* develop a discourse around the metaphoric journey main stops which goes beyond the inner-city boundaries using the concept of entanglement and exploring the relationship of the territorial scale of the contemporary municipality of Durban (outer-city) and the post-colonial inner-city.

Belula Tecle Misghina's paper analyses in detail the design workshop themes, locations and topics in *Reconnection and Revitalisation: from Warwick Junction to the Waterfront*.

The section *Comparative and further Studies* collects three contributes. Guendalina Salimei's comments of a design based investigation *Durban-Rivertown. The functional and landscape recovery of residual urban areas* started during the UIA 2014 Durban with graduating students who worked on ideas for the revitalisation, social integration and sustainable development of inner cities by introducing pedestrian oriented mixed uses and models for higher density building.

The study of Zhou Zhengxu, Hu Yaqi, Liu Shan *Distribution of Settlements in Valleys in Guizhou, China. A Regional Perspective* presents some analogies between the territorial scale of Durban Municipalities and ethnic groups living in townships and the territorial of the Guizhou valley settlements inhabited by minorities and discuss distribution rules of settlement group in the valley in these cases. Zhou Zhengxu was part of the teaching staff UIA 2014 Durban workshop.

The paper by Anna Irene Del Monaco and Francesco Menegatti built in the form of a dialogue *Theaters and cities. Flânerie between the metropolis of the north and south of the world on the traces of migrant models*, recalls some historical elements discussed in the first section of this book – especially by Whelan and Benincampi – on heritage, migration of architectural models with special reference to the typology of the theatres and opera houses. Music and drama are a specific characters of Durban city-life, as Luckan reminds in his essay when describing the Grey Street Precinct highlights, a relevant aspect of Durban identity: “the characteristic vitality of life plays out through the drama of human movement diurnally; assuming a harmonious yet complex live, work and play environment”.



The Herb/Muthi Market. (Photo: Anna Irene Del Monaco)



Wilson's Warf.



Durban: the water front, the sea, the railway. (Photo: Anna Irene Del Monaco)