ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA has, until recently, been marked by a noticeable absence of debates about its politics. blank Architecture, apartheid and after is a collection of essays edited by curator and architect Hilton Judin and writer Ivan Vladislavic, which responds to this absence. This ambitious book brings together architects, urban planners, curators, academics, journalists, writers, artists, and photographers to examine legacies of colonial and apartheid spatial planning and the built environment.

The collection includes over forty written and photographic essays, most of which are short and concise. The textual essays range in voice and tone; some are personal, written in the spirit of memoir and cultural criticism, while others—especially those dealing with architectural history—are more technical and specialized. As an anthropologist, it is the former that I found most compelling; subjects range from crime and the restriction of public space (Lindsay Bremner), to an examination of the ambiguities of being a black tourist visiting a colonial game lodge (Njabulo Ndebele). It is to the editors’ credit that this book opens up the field of architecture in such imaginative ways. blank also includes numerous archival photographs, such as images of white male architects admiring modernist buildings and plans for depressingly monotonous native townships. These historical images contrast sharply with the contemporary photos of everyday life in South Africa.

But blank is not an easy book to negotiate, since it has numerous systems of cross-referencing. Rather than refer to page numbers, the table of contents is displayed on a map; the reader sees, for instance, that a piece by Achmat Dangor is located at “F10,” while another by David Bunn is at “C4.” Looking at the map, we see that essays clustered in the F10 area focus on themes of forced removals, while the C4 area is situated amongst those of fortification and commemoration. Following this map of contents, there is also a list of vocabulary called “Positions,” where words such as buffer zone, motorway, and vulnerable are briefly described and linked to various essays. Sometimes the effect is ironic or provocative. For instance, under “Afrikaans” one finds the self-satisfied words of N.P. van Wyk Louw, quoted from the 1966 South African
Architectural Record: “Afrikaans is the language that links Western Europe and Africa; it draws its strength from these two sources; it forms a bridge between the huge bright West and magical Africa.” From here, we are encouraged to turn to essays that offer critical accounts of intersections between apartheid, nationalism and architecture. Finally, there is also an index that refers to conventional page numbers which, unfortunately, are barely visible on the page. All this busyness can be distracting, though there are, I think, good reasons for the strategy. First, the process of reading blank mimics map-reading, thus providing an apt spatial metaphor. Second, this is clearly a non-authoritative, democratic text, where the reader is expected to act with a sense of agency in negotiating paths through the terrain. These themes of democracy, itineraries, and agency certainly resonate with the cultural politics of transition in post-apartheid South Africa. In contrast with apartheid’s logic of containment according to racial categories, this book encourages movement and exploration without being prescriptive.

Together, the essays offer a strong sense that apartheid is not over; despite the 1994 democratic elections its legacies and effects still linger. This is particularly evident in the built environment, from the domination of colonial and apartheid-era monuments that celebrate racialized forms of citizenship, to cities with hugely different levels of infrastructure depending upon the politics of location. In fact, a number of authors suggest that South African cities are increasingly segregated, now following lines of class (which closely resemble those of race) and market forces, rather than being organized through governmental social engineering. These dynamics will be familiar to North American readers; indeed, critics such as Edward Said, bell hooks, and Mike Davis describe spatial segregation in American cities by using the term apartheid. South African cities in the apartheid-era shared many characteristics with colonial ones, so it is hardly surprising that post-apartheid and post-colonial cities now confront similar constraints. Suffice it to say that blank will be relevant to a wider audience than South African area specialists.

A sense of disillusionment with urban planning and abstract policy documents predominates in many of the volume’s essays. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the architects of apartheid used the seemingly neutral language of planning and modernization to nurture Afrikaner nationalism and to marginalize and subjugate black South Africans. In blank, numerous authors clearly enjoy witnessing informal and spontaneous appropriations of space, especially in formerly white cities. For instance, Ivan Vladislavie glances at stowaway children hiding in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, while Melinda Silverman notes that street photographers take photos of customers who stand alongside a cardboard figure of former President Nelson Mandela, in a Pretoria square named for Johannes Strijdom, Prime Minister from 1956 to 1958. Mark Swilling, in his essay “Rival Futures: Struggle visions, post-apartheid choices” offers a
concluding statement that evokes the atmosphere of much of blank: "We need a sense of place that emerges from continuous practice as we re-engage our cities in a new set of conversations about their identities, structures, forms, functions, conflicts, poverties and potentials. We will have to replace the certainties of policy and strategy with the uncertainties of dialogue and interaction" (299). This is a tall order given apartheid's many landscapes of exclusion, and it is a project to which blank already contributes.