BLACK BOX – THE SOWETO THEATRE

By AFRITECTS
Photographs by Tony de Oliveira

I visited the Soweto Theatre on a Spring Day in 2012 when the Johannesburg Arts Alive International Festival kicked off with a really brilliant production of the 1980 play Bopha by Percy Mtwa.

I do not want to comment on the exterior – its startling colours and shapes justified (perhaps) by the absolute grey and dreary Soweto townscape where one yearns for landmarks, if only for safety reasons.

But the interior spaces are another matter – a vibrant setting for vibrant theatre where the excitement and brio of the one animates the energy of the other. The foyer is a narrow, linear triple-volume space behind a giant curtain wall where Soweto glamour and the rising crescendo of voices contribute to the theatrical occasion. In the crush I met Clara Almeida, a lead architect of the design team. I think I heard her say that her intention was happiness, with the giant curved tiled forms that envelope space, mind and conversation. Easy to believe as Clara engages in hilarious conversation with Sarah Callburn and others whose names I cannot pronounce. Architecture and theatre in Soweto: out of the box.’

Clive Chipkin

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Recently there has been teeming infrastructural, residential and commercial investment poured into Soweto, the “city within a city”. From the BRT (Bus Rapid Transport) system to the new Jabulani/ Zola District Hospital, to an upgraded Orlando Stadium, including retail developments such as the Maponya and Jabulani Malls, Soweto is expanding rapidly. Not in terms of urban sprawl but internally, to sustain and develop its residents.

The new Soweto Theatre brings a significant contribution to the rich arts and cultural context of this township, which already makes a great contribution to the country’s tourism revenue, with many local and international tourists visiting its historical sites.

The theatre is in the heart of a culturally rich area within Jabulani, sited in a public park next to the famous Jabulani amphitheatre, at which many significant historical events took place. Its objectives were to provide a versatile venue for the advancement of arts and culture in the area, and in Soweto.

The brief from the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC) was to design three venues to house primarily theatrical performances but also to accommodate musical and dance productions, including choral performances. Additionally, the facility, which it is anticipated would be an inspiration for similar developments, was intended to host festivals, conferences, meetings and community gatherings.

Former Johannesburg Mayor, Amos Masondo, said the addition of the theatre was ‘an important part of transforming Soweto from a dormitory neighbourhood into a normalised one. We are striving to
change Soweto into a sustainable human settlement that is known not just as a place where people go, but where people also go to. His sentiments are shared by the City’s Director of Arts, Culture and Heritage Services, Steven Sack. ‘We want to turn Soweto into a viable neighbourhood that has facilities you find in the inner city, including entertainment and recreational facilities of the very best Johannesburg could offer.’

**PROJECT CONCEPT**

Performance requires an audience and performers. Theatre requires performance with a disconnection from the outside world, a sealed box to hold an audience and performers. In the theatre world this space is known as “the black-box”.

Performance spaces in Apartheid-oppressed Soweto were nomadic. With no dedicated venues, theatres were make-shift and temporary: any “box” would have to do. In the absence of a formal theatre space, what developed was an atmosphere that was relaxed, accessible and unintimidating, with the focus on entertainment, precisely the reprieve needed from the reality and regulations of the time.

**TARGET AUDIENCE**

Johannesburg City identified the long overdue need for a public theatre in Soweto – a formal theatre space with its specialised facilities that would serve a large community of theatre goers, as well as provide the opportunity for performers to showcase their talent. Although the need for the space was obvious, the response to the brief could not be. Simply providing generic infrastructure without examining the existing theatre culture of Soweto would not meet expectations of what the theatre should be, nor become a
space that the local community would embrace and feel was theirs to use and enjoy.

**INNOVATION**

What would then define theatre space for a theatre-less community with a mature and astute theatre culture? The concept for the building needed to allow for state-of-the-art facilities, whilst retaining the freedom of spirit that made performance in Soweto so enticing in the first place. A kind of theatre needed to be invented. The existing typology: the monolithic, impenetrable, secretive mass with one, almost reluctant, public gesture (the front door), would go against the ethos of Soweto’s theatre community.

The goal was to demystify the facility developed, and to beguile the community to use it. The humble performance-box became the focus; it was to be completely visible both inside and outside of the building. As the brief called for a collection of three performance spaces, each was highlighted and made identifiable on the building’s exterior. The inner workings of the complex express themselves outwards to the community as highly visible beacons in the landscape, enticing the audience in.

**EXECUTION**

Separating and giving clear identity to each of the performance boxes offered a design challenge. If buildings are seen to comprise serviced and service spaces, an architectural device had to be found to separate these elements. Wing walls flanking the building are used to contain the service spaces (ablutions, offices, stairwells, kitchens, storerooms, air-movement systems, and so forth). They frame the performance venues (the served spaces) while defining the internal, street-like, foyer spaces around the performance boxes. The shapes of these boxes were given further identity with curved edges and corners. Skylights and glass floors were used to detach them from the concrete floors of the building. Each box was then given its own identity, using various shades and finishes of red, blue and yellow ceramic tiles. The interior remains the black box that makes theatre possible and the exterior colours represent the

"The Soweto Theatre in Jabulani represents the first professional performance arts venue to be developed in any former Apartheid township."

Statement by architects, Digest of SA Architecture vol 17.

Under Apartheid the street became an intensified public domain accommodating most civic actions from both protest to pleasure. Today the necessary transformation of the South African township remains a compelling challenge — to modernise or to transform. Indeed, this is a project that directly confronts debate around urbanisation and the emerging “African” City on the continent. Mbembe and Simone are primary proponents of the need to establish new urban configurations that are conducive of supporting an “Africa Life”.

The Soweto complex is a conventional western theatre. In this sense, what this project’s client and its architects have produced does not reflect significant thought regarding spatial transformation. Needless to say the project will provide a valuable venue for the Soweto community. However, as with most projects in this country, it will support the status quo and cater to an elite. An opportunity has again been missed in recognizing the need for a more inclusionary architecture that reflects local practices and addresses the dire need for spatial transformation in the service of other ways of being South Africa.

Iain Low

ENDNOTE


vibrancy, personality and excitement associated with the theatre in Soweto. Two hundred thousand ceramic tiles adorn the walls of the performance boxes, each tile laid individually by tradesmen from the local community.

**BUILDING DESCRIPTION**

The largest of the three performance spaces is a 420-seat venue with a fixed stage and tiered seating, a full orchestra pit, a bridge for a fly tower and wings. The other two are a 180-seater and 90-seater flat-floor theatre. Having no fixed stage or seating, they offer a necessary flexibility. The orchestra pit, fly tower and backstage facilities are shared between the three venues.

The eastern and western sides of the theatre boxes are defined by curving fortress walls (blinders) containing all other ancillary spaces. One of the most challenging design and engineering features and arguably the most daunting to achieve, was the curved walls. They curve both horizontally and vertically, creating a parabolic shape. The walls are sloped and curved for functionality as the service spaces on the upper floors (offices/boardrooms) required more space than the public ablutions on the ground floor; this gives the wing walls their distinctive, top-heavy profile.

Outside the theatre is a special public space covered by a tensile structure – a foyer that can be used as a pause space, an additional performance area, or a social gathering place during intermission.

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**Client:** Johannesburg Property Company (JPC)

**Project Team:**
- **Developer:** Jabulani Development Company (Pty) Ltd
- **Project Manager:** Settlement Planning Services (Setplan)
- **Principal Agent & Quantity Surveyor:** QS Bureau
- **Architects:** Afritects
- **Structural / Civil Engineers:** Themba
- **Electrical Engineers:** CRK Consulting Engineers
- **Mechanical Engineers:** Ubunye Engineering Services

**Theatre Specialist:** Denis Hutchinson

**Acoustic Engineer:** Pro Acoustic Consortium

**Tensile Structure Design:** Tension Structures

**Principal Contractor (joint venture):** Group Five and Inkanyeli Projects

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5 Section, ground floor plan
6 Interior showing yellow performance venue
7 Interior of 430 seat, Red Performance venue
8 View of lobby through entrance doors