

# *The Translation of Dreams*

## Psychoanalytic and Poetic Devices in South African Architectural Education

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*'The critique of ideology should not begin with critiquing reality,  
but with the critique of our dreams.'*

Slavoj Žižek<sup>1</sup>

There are two kinds of dreams. There are the dreams that we share, and there are dreams that are our own. One could say 'I have a dream' (meaning 'I have an ambition'), which can be shared, and which then becomes political. And one could say 'I dreamt' (meaning, 'I hallucinated while unconscious'), which is a more personal experience. Architecture, and the politics of dreams – or the dreams of politics, for that matter – form the context of

this essay, and in particular how this thematized a design project in South African architectural education.

It appears that, in the current state of oneirology, the most prominent hypothesis for the function of dreams is that they are a by-product of processes of memory formation, consolidation and storage.<sup>2</sup> The fact that emotions are often overwhelming in dreams is likely due to condensation. Condensation is among the terms Freud used to describe the *dream work* – the transformation of the latent content of dreams into the manifest content (or, to simplify, the process of turning the meaning of dreams into the experience of dreams).<sup>3</sup> The application of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche in condensation are immediately apparent. Metaphors are used to pack experience into denser forms, since single images can contain multiple meanings simultaneously. Metonymy can economize space, since something small could stand in for something large, or something simple for something complex. In synecdoche – when a fraction of something stands in for the whole – something small is recorded (or stored) in order to trigger a representation of the whole. The reason why these poetic devices are so popular in poetry is because of the reduction in space (higher density) that they make possible.

Condensation has an analogue in design. When formal and theoretical processes are combined, composed and conflated in designed products, the products themselves become dense repositories of intent, desire and context. Like dreams, these products are nebulous documents of struggle and aspiration. And, as such, they are subject to analysis and interpretation. Unlike dreams, however, designed products in general – and architectural works in particular – are experienced communally. They are shared, and by implication, that makes them *political*.

Memory serves here as a conceptual link between the different senses of the word dream; the highly personal visions of the unconscious, and the ambitions of our society. By establishing connections between architectural concepts and literary devices employed in mnemonic processes, we can reveal some of the workings of architecture as a cultural mechanism which

both stores shared memories, and, through interpretation and occupation, produces new culture.

Psychoanalysis has many well-documented applications in both medicine and literary criticism (some more contentious than others). We are, however, of the opinion that these investigations are at their most interesting, and necessary, when they are not required to be conclusive. Following Adam Phillips' assertion that '... it is more illuminating to read psychoanalysts as poets ... rather than failed or aspiring scientists', we are not here interested in definitive diagnoses and treatment.<sup>4</sup> We are not attempting to *resolve* conflicts. We are, instead, attempting to mix some of the traditions of medical diagnostics with literary criticism in the context of South African heritage debates in order to illustrate 'different ways of living with ourselves and different descriptions of these so-called selves.'<sup>5</sup>

In psychoanalysis, the quarantine of memories is known as repression. And it is through repression that the ego seeks '... to exclude certain trends in the mind not merely from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity'.<sup>6</sup> In the South African context, where the past is often experienced as a nightmare, a fundamental inquiry into the precepts of architectural design and shared history has the potential to *relocate* repressed events of trauma. These events, which currently exist primarily in the historical record, can be translated into the present, and shown to still be active, but exerting their effects surreptitiously.

This essay aims to illustrate and elaborate these definitions through brief readings of three design-research projects conducted in Unit 11 of the Graduate School of Architecture (GSA) at the University of Johannesburg. Within the larger framework of *Transformative Pedagogies*, this programme aims to develop alternatives to that which is generally considered canonical, either by bringing research from the periphery to the centre, or by describing works in existing, established canons from new points of view, or in new languages. A number of projects are being developed which *work through* (rather than resolve) concerns of material memory, cultural edifices and politics, employing metaphors of ghosts, nightmares, phantom limbs, exquisite

corpses and plastic identities. By illustrating (or designing, if you will) such conditions, the unit attempts to bring to the surface some of the historical fragments haunting the South African collective subconscious.

In 2017, Unit 11 operated under the title *Radical Heritage*. As such, its primary interest is in the potential of processes that make significant changes to history and heritage not only on its surface (the narrative of history) but also its structure (the language in which history is recorded and legitimized). Design-research students are encouraged to make associations more or less freely in the early stages of the design process, after which, through critique, reflexive relationships are established between designed work and its interpretation. The unit makes extensive use of allegory and figuration to create a slight distance between the students' immediate frame of reference and the complex political realities with which the projects are entangled. This method allows students to expose and interrogate their biases and proclivities.

In something of a direct act of projection, the projects below experiment with the definition of architecture through a number of psychoanalytical analogies. It could be cast as the ego, sifting through experiences and storing (in built form) desired memories while repressing others. Or, architecture could represent repressed memories themselves, which are stored at a safe distance from the 'consciousness' of society. The projects define architecture as a collective dream, condensing, sorting and forgetting our (shared) history.

The reflexive relationship that exists between a society and its architecture means that architecture can not only function as a document of oppression, it is also an agent in oppression. Since the cultural production of architecture is selective, it can give permanent form to (and thus worsen) problematic conditions. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a series of public hearings and confessions which took place between 1996 and 1998, was intended to purge institutions of their apartheid heritage.<sup>7</sup> But, while it is possible to imagine the reformation of institutions through confessions, hearings and amnesties, the procedures for the reform of architectural

structures are significantly less established. In order to address the implication of architecture in apartheid (and colonial) heritage, we rely on the weak links between physical objects and their intended meanings. In other words, buildings, instead of having to be physically dismantled, can be taken apart figuratively, and new meanings can be proposed for them. Though there may be truth, and there may be reconciliation, neither is absolute or final – they are a continuous process. We delve into our history over and over, digging up, revealing and confronting the conditions that give form to architecture and to which architecture gives form.

## Projects

### *An 'Other' Archive by Sabine Waskow*

Among the most significant of the political upheavals (or social mobilizations) in South Africa's recent past started on 9 March 2015 with the request to remove a statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town. Known as 'Rhodes Must Fall', the movement has since developed into a number of subsequent protests, organizations and think-tanks, eventually leading to serious suggestions for a radical restructuring of South African society through the movement's transmogrification into 'Fees Must Fall' – which calls for free tertiary education. The monument was removed shortly after the protests began. But the protest against the monument was indicative of something else: it stood in place of a general awareness that things had not changed enough since the advent of democracy in 1994. And the removal of the statue (and a number of small concurrent concessions) is a symbolic act which, while defusing tensions at the time, did not appreciate the underlying conditions that led to the protests.

Jacques Derrida, one of the most influential thinkers on the subject of structural linguistics, on several occasions referred to himself as a 'historian', but was simultaneously undertaking to dismantle what he saw as the 'dominant Western historical narrative'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *An 'Other' Archive*, Sabine Waskow explores the dissection and reconstruction of historically

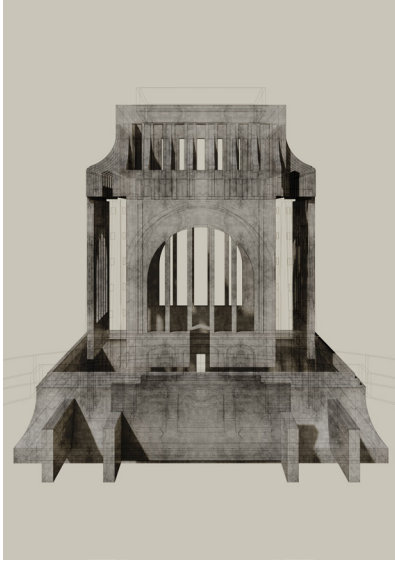


Fig. 1. The Voortrekker Monument, in the administrative capital Pretoria, is analysed by stripping it down in physical layers after which the various elements are critically rearranged. The image depicts visible parts of the structural system as well as the enclosing shell.

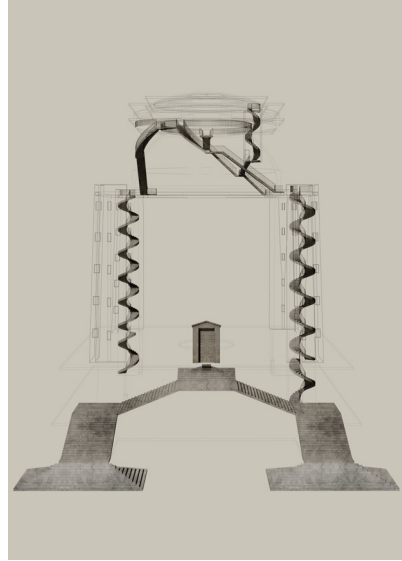


Fig. 2. Caption: Circulatory elements are isolated and represented as a layer of the monument before the elements are recomposed. This forms part of Waskow's process of deletion, reordering and insertion. Photos: Sabine Waskow, 2017.



Fig. 3. Project by Melissa Brand, 2017

A 1:20 scale model of an inhabitable kinetic object. This object reifies the memories of specific violent events that have taken place at Constitution Hill during the time when it served as a prison. By emulating the gesture of strangulation – through opening and closing continuously – the object gives visitors an experience of that event on the ineffable level, as they experience constriction without necessarily understanding the historical content.

prominent buildings and apartheid-era monuments (Figures 1 to 4). Currently, these structures stand unresolved and untransformed. Waskow's chimerical recompositions point to the possibility of new orders that may emerge from them if they are reconfigured rather than removed.

*An 'Other' Archive* seeks to find new means of expression for suppressed narratives and erased memories through subversive, deconstructive altering techniques such as syntactic re-ordering, altering the surface structure to alter the deep structure, as well as layering and stitching together contrasting narratives. These techniques seek to generate and inscribe new forms and structures that allow for alternative narrative histories to be read and experienced. By altering the placement, materials and hierarchies of elements of the monuments, *An 'Other' Archive* scripts and enables new functions, programmes and events.

### *Phantom Limbs by Melissa Brand*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was conceived as a mechanism to work through atrocities of the past by bringing trauma into the public realm, heralding the reform of society and the unification of a nation once divided. Monuments were designed and built on sites of struggle to commemorate the pain of the past and literally bring our newfound democracy 'into being'. Not being able to deal with the ineffable, however, the TRC mostly *addressed* these issues, without being able to *redress* them. The *Phantom Limbs* are composed through different readings of body memory, re-enacting fragments of past events and, simultaneously, establishing access to the past through experience, rather than through words or images.

A phantom limb is the sensation that an amputated or missing limb is still attached to the body, indicating the idea that toxicities, despite their removal, may still be felt and, in fact may be worsened if simply removed, since the source of pain can no longer be subject to direct intervention. The *Phantom Limbs* are an attempt to reconcile South African utopian ideals, such as the Rainbow Nation and the TRC, with the indelible memory of the



traumas of the events that brought them into being in the first place. Adopting Freud's reading of the *unheimliche* (the unhomely, the familiar unfamiliar, or a haunting) allows us to relocate the notion of 'buried' or concealed violent events into experience.<sup>9</sup> Treating the site as both body and memory, the project proposes a reading of the histories and characteristics of Constitution Hill as a place of incorporeal trauma. In this project, a series of bio-kinetic architectural mechanisms test, pressurize and unearth past events on the site, eliciting symbolic eruptions as a reflection of a cathartic need. One such event, is the legendary strangulation of an inmate at the prison that was housed on Constitution Hill until 1983. In Figures 5 to 7, we are presented with a scale model of an inhabitable kinetic object re-presenting the ineffable aspects of that violent event. These 'ghosts' bring '[that which] should have remained hidden and secret and . . . to light'.<sup>10</sup> By reifying the phantom limbs, they are brought back from an immaterial realm. They are no longer ghosts, and as such, they are exorcized, ironically, through incarnation.

### *A Mausoleum for Pan-Africanism by Aisha Balde*

Of particular interest in the current global political context, is the prevalence of walls as a metaphor for both security and exclusion. As the world now shifts from national to regional boundaries, South Africa has become a significant agent in the production of the region known generally as sub-Saharan Africa. Aisha Balde's project, *A Mausoleum for Pan-Africanism*, is located on the borderline between South Africa and Zimbabwe – a significant point of entry into South Africa. The borderline itself is a 600mm-wide, several-thousand-kilometre-long piece of 'no-man's land'. The *Mausoleum* is effectively a border wall with one significant departure from the type – it does not separate one side from the other. The wall is full of generous openings and is made primarily of very thin elements which, while having a substantial visual presence in the elevation (Figures 8 to 11) is almost non-existent in the cross section.

In her 2011 poem, *Conversations About Home*, Warsan Shire makes use

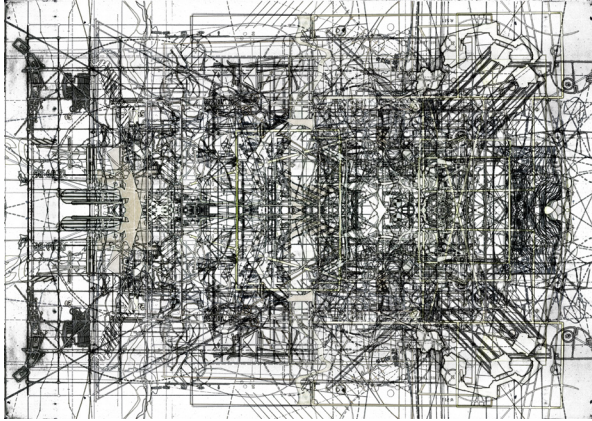


Fig. 4. The new border wall, while by no means definitively separating one nation from another, has a substantial presence in the elevation. Here a scale drawing of part of the elevation of the several-thousand-kilometre long wall.  
Author: Aisha Balde, 2017

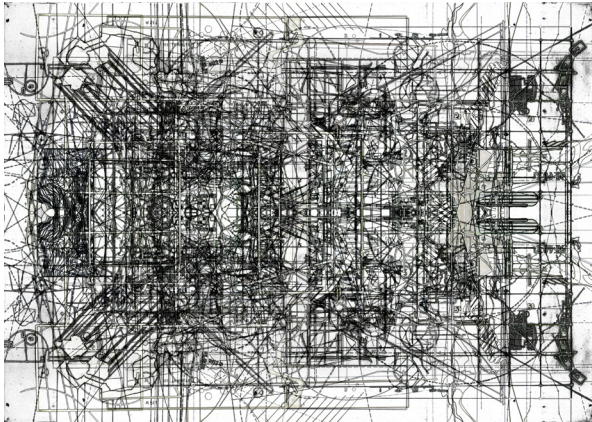


Fig. 5. The 600mm space of the borderline also takes the form of a threshold in a chapel, where a South African citizen and a Zimbabwean citizen (from either side of the line) undertake a ritual to wed. The wall alludes to limbs, bodies, fissures and gaps, allegorically describing the conditions and processes of bodies moving over borders through the wedding ritual.  
Author: Aisha Balde, 2017

of synecdoche when she writes: '... *the lines, the forms, the people at the desks, the calling cards, the immigration officer, the looks on the street...*' to allude to the entirety of the devastating experience of forced migration.<sup>11</sup> Platonic form, a function of synecdoche, could be summarized as the definitions that all instances of a type share. If we take the function of a chair, for example, as its platonic form, or essence (as architectural Modernism often does), it follows logically that, if defined only by that measure, a horse would become a chair once mounted. It is clear that there must be many other definitions of a thing other than its assumed function. Similarly, architecture (and therefore walls) need to be defined by more than function. And Balde's project, by presenting us with a wall which does not perform its primary function, encourages us to be inventive in developing new rationales for its *raison d'être*. One such alternative function is that *The Mausoleum for Pan-Africanism* prevents separation, since it stands, metonymically, in the place of a functional wall. It is a mausoleum to the national border since the idea of a functional wall separating one nation from another is buried alive by its presence. With this gesture, Balde stakes a claim for a non-nationalist conception of Africa.

### **Over the Rainbow**

In the 1990s, under the direction of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and a number of other notable political and cultural leaders, South Africa embarked on a self-conscious nation-building programme under the general banner of the 'Rainbow Nation'. The name represents a summary of the kind of language that was necessary in the early stages of South Africa's liberation narrative to loosen the grip of racist regimes. Entering the next phase means engaging with structures that lie beneath the veneer of peace, tolerance, freedom, transparency and rights. Any intervention cannot, in this context, simply be a rebranding exercise; it must engage meaningfully with the structures of society. For Unit 11 it is not enough to merely rephrase or expand the discursive field to include more dialectical considerations (for example adding 'privacy' to balance the rhetoric of 'transparency' and/or

‘economic freedom’ to ‘human rights’). It is, instead, necessary to engage in the production of entirely new languages with which to express possibilities that transcend the limitations of the current political imagination. Architecture, as a condensed medium (where meanings are at all times multiple), can, through subjective interpretation from a variety of points of view, contribute to the development of such languages. Ultimately, we want to produce graduates who can draw the *real* architecture of our society, and for that, they must draw dreams.

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 193.
- 2 J. Lee Kavanau, ‘Sleep, Memory Maintenance and Mental Disorders,’ in *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, vol. 12, no. 2, May (2000), 199-208.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translated by Joan Riviere (1927) (New York: Norton, 1960 reprint), 8.
- 4 Adam Phillips, *One Way and Another: New and Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013).
- 5 Adam Phillips, ‘The Art of Nonfiction No.7’, in *The Paris Review*, no. 208, (2014). Available at: <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6286/adam-phillips-the-art-of-nonfiction-no-7-adam-phillips>. Accessed 10 August 2017.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams* (1914), translated by M.D. Eder (New York: Dover, 2001 reprint).
- 7 Stéphane Leman Langlois and Clifford Shearing, ‘Transition, Forgiveness and Citizenship: The TRC and the Social Construction of Forgiveness’, in F. Du Bois and A. Pedain (eds.), *Justice and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 206-228.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by B. Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 130.
- 9 Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), in *The Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 11 Warsan Shire, ‘Conversations About Home (At the Deportation Centre)’, in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (London: Flipped Eye Publishing, 2011).