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Chipkin makes sense of Jo'burg's complex Vision

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[Seminal works: Clive Chipkin's two books shed light on Jo'burg architecture and society. \(Clarissa Sosin\)](#)

It was in 2001, passing through the then Johannesburg International Airport on my way back from a field trip in Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo that I first discovered the work of Clive M Chipkin, the architect who was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the Witwatersrand in June. Having a few hours to spend in transit, I was

browsing through the collection of the airport bookshop when I stumbled on a copy of his 1993 book, *Johannesburg Style. Architecture & Society 1880s-1960s*.

As I was investigating the architecture and planning of Lubumbashi and had become aware of the important sphere of influence from l'Afrique australe [Southern Africa] on the urban culture of the "mining capital" of the former Belgian Congo, I had been looking out for architecture history studies on South African cities.

I was already familiar with the 1999 exhibition catalogue *Blank. Architecture, apartheid and after* (edited by Hilton Judin & Ivan Vladislavic), a publication circulating widely in Europe at the time, and the 1998 volume *Architecture of the Transvaal* (edited by Schalk le Roux), but I had actually failed to notice fully the importance of Chipkin's contributions to these publications until I read his Jo'burg book.

For someone not well acquainted with the city, the latter offered a most captivating reading experience. Presenting an extremely rich, although often puzzling portrayal of the city, it did what its subtitle suggested: explain how the making and shaping of its particular urban landscape was intrinsically linked to political, economic, social and cultural events that had marked South Africa's past.

I was quite overwhelmed by the complex trajectories that Chipkin developed in his survey, showing along the way how much Johannesburg was a globally connected city, the architecture of which bore traces of historical links to Paris or Brazil. Trying to follow this guide, whose intimate understanding of this fascinating city surfaced in almost every sentence, was both a pleasure and frustrating, and I did get lost more than once in the bulk of information ranging from scholarly data to the anecdotal.

Almost 10 years later, my colleague and friend Hannah le Roux sent me the sequel to Chipkin's study on the city, the 2008 book *Johannesburg Transition. Architecture & Society from 1950*. And again, the reading proved an adventure, demanding a combination of utmost concentration with a willingness just to go with the flow of the text.

Intimate view of Johannesburg

Chipkin's two volumes challenge the conventional standards of scholarly writing. Instead of offering one, clear and coherent argument, his work on Johannesburg is, as one reader aptly described it, indeed "protean, like the city".

For me Chipkin's work remains seminal, even considering the growing literature on the history of 20th-century South African architecture and urban planning.

For a large part its quality resides in what it provides as a rare, intimate view of Johannesburg's urban landscape written by an "embedded" and engaged architect/historian/critic.

His narrative resonates throughout with an overt passion for aspects of forms, construction and materials — and, with great erudition, Chipkin succeeds in situating the local architectural debate and practice in a broader architectural history of the 20th century, thereby demonstrating that we, as architectural historians writing from the West, need to rethink the still common historiographical framework of "centre- periphery" when discussing cities such as Johannesburg.

Notwithstanding his personal acquaintance with the local architectural milieu, Chipkin always remains critical of his peers. His assessments of particular buildings and designers clearly illustrates that he takes architecture too seriously as a discipline to be left to the forces of the market, although he, having been in the profession himself, understands all too well the conditions and restraints within which designers always have to operate.

In this respect, one of the most important lessons to be learnt from his work is that architects (and planners for that matter) are responsible for the choices they make, instead of just being pawns on a chess board in a game played by others.

If I often refer to Chipkin's books when teaching the history of architecture in (South) Africa to my students at Ghent University, it is not only because they offer a very insightful perspective on Johannesburg's rich urban landscape, but also because they remind us of the fact that architects are professionals who can — and should — take an engaged position vis-à-vis the society in which they are active.

For whom do you build? What commissions do you accept and which ones do you refuse? And what are you willing to do in order to get projects financed?

Precisely because he deals with a city that has known the subsequent stages of colonialism, apartheid and post-apartheid, Chipkin's analysis of Johannesburg architecture makes the complexities of such questions explicit. His portrayal of the discipline is disturbing on several occasions, as when he describes the Alexandra Hostels as "unité blocks of a sort designed by deranged disciples of Le Corbusier". In this, Chipkin's engaged position as an architectural historian mirrors his role as one of the principal founders of Architects Against Apartheid.

In a country in which the practices of architecture and planning suffer from the burden of having been instrumentalised under apartheid, Chipkin's approach remains refreshing. While he never denies the intricate relationships between architecture and politics, more importantly, he succeeds in avoiding the trap of reducing architecture to politics.

Demonstrating that a love for the design profession, societal engagement and scholarly seriousness are not necessarily mutually exclusive but rather can reinforce one another, his work holds important lessons for the writing of architectural history well beyond the South African context. Chipkin's work deserves a wide, international readership.

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