

# **Igniting imagination through darkness: discovering fear and fantasy through shadows, silence and the invisible.**

*Barend Slabbert and June Jordaan*

## **Abstract**

Darkness invites imagination. On the one hand, it creates intimacy. It has been observed by many artforms that we feel the need to close off our vision during intense emotional experiences, during dreaming, listening to music, or caressing our loved ones. Shadows can be seen do this for us, as they dim vision and entice unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy. On the other hand, darkness entices fear. A person, who is afraid of the dark, writes Finnish architect Palasmaa, has no factual reason to fear darkness as such; he is afraid of his own imagination. Darkness, or the lack of light, is also often accompanied by silence and has the ominous ability to render the visible invisible. To probe the experience of darkness, this paper will refer to the philosophical position of phenomenology. In this regard, darkness is seen as a phenomenon that is experienced through our bodily senses. The phenomenology of darkness will be investigated by making reference to the way we project ourselves onto architectural spaces, also known as ‘mimesis of the body’. Furthermore, it will be investigated how our perceptions, memories and imaginings of past experiences influence such projections. This paper hopes to show how the relation between imagination, our mental faculty that forms images of external concepts not present to the senses, and darkness, can be understood by interpreting spatial narratives of architectural interiors. A selection of evocative interiors will be interpreted in terms of three factors that contribute to the phenomenology of darkness: shadows, silence, and the invisible. By doing so, this paper hopes to indicate how darkness has strong existential expressions that can be incorporated into spatial narratives in architectural interiors.

**Key Words:** Phenomenology of darkness, imagination, narratives, meaning, spatial experience, perception.

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## **1. Wallpaper versus the World**

Due to advancements in technology and global communication, the world is shrinking and the eradication of place is becoming the norm.<sup>1</sup> These include both exterior and interior places. Historical buildings, containers of such interior places, are frequently being stripped from their meaning internally and being replaced with universal contemporary interiors.<sup>2</sup> This occurrence disregards ‘topistic’ qualities of locales and, albeit inadvertently, contributes to the eradication of place globally.<sup>3</sup> To counter this process, a more sensitive approach by interior architects is required. As interior design projects are often smaller, quicker and less expensive

than comprehensive architectural projects, they have the potential to be a strong force in the resistance to this eradication of place. In ‘Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered’, Schumacher echoes this. He argues that a constellation of small scale developments are far more sustainable than large scale developments.<sup>4</sup> Lyotard similarly argues that small narratives are more in tune with our multicultural, post-colonial world.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Finding meaning in old places

Historical buildings are by definition meaningful and have innate spatial and haptic qualities. How interiors of historical buildings are approached is of particular concern due to the cultural significance these buildings hold. As a result of the ongoing need for functional adaptation, the interiors of these buildings become spatio-temporal.<sup>6</sup> How these interiors facilitate functional adaptations, whilst giving cognisance to topistic qualities of locales, should become the central challenge of the interior architect. Merleau-Ponty argues that one can only find meaning in something experienced with all the senses.<sup>7</sup> He notes that the ocularcentric paradigm is the ‘privileging of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world.’<sup>8</sup> These concerns are particularly relevant in architectural teaching and practice. Interior spaces, for example, are often photographed uninhabited and designs presented unpopulated as if frozen in time. As a result our haptic engagements with the environment around us are suppressed, alienating us from experiencing with all our senses.<sup>9</sup> This study, therefore hopes to indicate how a multi-sensory approach to interior architecture may be utilised to celebrate place by making the body and its senses aware of the meaning and significance of its historical containers.

According to the Burra Charter, cultural significance is embodied within a place itself.<sup>10</sup> It refers to actual tangible materials, context, the use or association of the building, along with the meaning attached to it. Heritage buildings are the most sensory form of record to the past which engages with all our senses, and should therefore be protected.<sup>11</sup> In *Poetry of Architecture* Ruskin notes: ‘We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.’<sup>12</sup> Heritage buildings provide the link between past and present cultures and lived experiences. These buildings are tangible records of history expressing identity whilst relaying a certain experience. Buildings reflect culture, values and beliefs, and portray diversity and uniqueness. They provide us with answers to our pasts informing us of our heritage, instil within us a sense of identity, and in doing so, become representatives of place and give a sense of belonging.<sup>13</sup>

There exist regulations in terms of interior interventions in historical buildings that provide both guidelines and restrictions to designers. Principles laid down by the Burra Charter state that existing matter and materials should be maintained to prevent deterioration of historical buildings. In order to adapt the building to a new function whilst conserving the original, new materials or additions should be

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clearly visible from the existing. An overt example of such an interior is the The Phantom Opera Garnier Restaurant in Paris. Here all the contemporary interventions are white or red, in stark contrast to the historical container. The Burra Charter further dictates that alterations, which affect the cultural significance of the building, should be reversible, while non-reversible changes should be a last resort.<sup>14</sup> New additions should be easily identifiable, imitations of any nature should be avoided, and that interventions through adaptations should be kept to a minimum. What is important to remember is that despite these regulations, significant historical buildings should remain relevant.<sup>15</sup> How interior architects have sought to interpret the meaning and significance of these buildings to assert this relevance should therefore be critically probed.

### **3. Sentimentality, Nostalgia and Haunted Spaces**

In Cape Town there exist various examples that represent a sentimental outlook that people have for places of the past. This nostalgic attitude has in selected cases even led to the demise of these places. The Werdmuller centre in Cape Town, for example, is seen as an iconic building of South African modernist architecture. Completely unpractical for its current usage as a shopping centre, the building has been left to fall into a state of disrepair. This has happened due to a sentimental reluctance to intervene in the building as a result of its supposed fragility in meaning. Another example in Cape Town that illustrates a hankering to the past or a 'continualist' viewpoint includes the interior of the manor house at Groot Constantia. This archetypical Dutch homestead, is essentially a pavilion building that has accrued a huge positive cache as a 'place' in Cape Town.<sup>16</sup> The interior of this homestead has been kept perfectly intact, creating an atmosphere arguably less grandiose than its heyday and more, perhaps inadvertently, haunted. Other historical buildings, such as The Mount Nelson Hotel and The Castle of Good Hope, are filled with similar haunted interiors. Another place in Cape Town that has been approached with utmost delicacy and even hesitancy is the redevelopment of District Six. After the forced removal of its residents during apartheid, this area was leveled to the ground. All that remains are religious buildings. The evidence of this traumatic event is marked by a cluster of massive voids on the edge of the city. To memorialise this locale and its traumatic history an old Methodist Mission Church has been converted into a permanent exhibition environment. The exhibition is purely visual, with information and graphics superficially applied to the interior. The exhibition consists of visual material, photographs, old street signs, and the recreation of some interior spaces. One's phenomenological body however, is not confronted with the trauma, disruption and anxiety that the exhibition narratives convey. The identification of an urban void is a powerful concept that can inform a moving spatial experience. Drawing on the notion of voids, the Jewish Museum in Berlin provides insight into a striking multisensory design. The 'Memory Void', confronts the body spatially, through visual, acoustic

and tactile senses. One is able to project imagination and memory onto this space. The messages are not overtly stated, but are instead open to interpretation through body-memory.<sup>17</sup> By comparison, the District 6 museum becomes more of a disneyfied environment, where unsettling messages and meanings have been brought into an environment that is controlled and hereby lessens the impact of the actual event.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. **Discontinuity and Rupture**

Another approach to contemporary interiors in historical buildings is in line with Habermas' argument that 'tradition can be blind'.<sup>19</sup> This approach says that to hanker after something resembling places as we have known them, is sheer nostalgia and the consequences of this mentality is the ubiquitous kitsch of neo-Tuscan or neo-whatever takes its fancy.<sup>20</sup> In this approach a 'rupture' from the past is strongly implied, in South African interior design this is common practice. Often, as a result of regulations, historical exteriors are left in tact, whilst interiors become open platforms.<sup>21</sup> A way of justifying this is that the exterior is viewed, as belonging to the public while the interior is private property. In Long Street Cape Town, for example, historical buildings are kept perfectly intact externally but get changed into parking lots internally.

Some interiors could be seen as temporarily disregarding the topistic qualities of their historical containers. Rotondo Di Via Besana, in Milan, for example, was originally built as a cemetery and its function has changed over time more than once. These functions include stables under Napoleonic rule, a shelter for the chronically sick and a laundrette. Recently it has become a facilitator for social events and exhibitions. In April 2013, it featured the Karl Lagerfeld's Little Black Jacket exhibition. A temporal façade replaced the existing one, while white washed timber panels formed a temporary internal skin. The photographs were fixed to this skin and illuminated by means of spotlights. The intervention hereby completely masked the original interior and accentuated the exhibition content. The building therefore obtains constantly a new temporal relevance.

An example of permanent rupture from the past is evident in the interior of the Michael Stevenson exhibition space in Woodstock. The internal space has been stripped and adapted to be re-used as a contemporary art gallery. The original parquet flooring and exposed services remain the only evidence of the past. Additional walls have been added and painted white along with the ceiling and services. Junctions between walls have been treated with a generic shadow line detail. The space, brightly lit from within, lacks texture and depth. The interior, uncompromisingly new, disregards any of the topistic historical qualities of the building that once was. The interior of the Michael Stevenson gallery, having a complete lack of colour and variety of finishes, has been left monotonous. Paintings and artwork applied to these blank canvas walls, dominate the interior, absorbing all the attention from the viewer. The past is deliberately erased from the

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interior. A similar interior exhibition space in this area is that of the What If The World gallery, situated in an old synagogue. The former building however was of limited significance and this approach has enabled new and temporal meaning to be instilled in the space by means of exhibition content. The synagogue however, is significant as it represents Cape Town's multicultural landscape. The eradication of the topistic qualities of this locale has compromised this significance.

#### **4. God is (Still) in the Details**

Whether interiors become a continuation of the past or rupture from it, the point remains that significant historical buildings have innate topistic characteristics that have meaning to embodied human beings. Design of exhibition spaces in these interiors should therefore be informed by the meaning of the historical containers and the exhibition content, and directed to the phenomenological body. In *'Resonance and Wonder'*, Greenblatt argues that a resonant type of exhibition allows the creation of relationships between the viewer and the object, enabling meaning within the viewer.<sup>22</sup> In order for one to attach meaning to a space, one needs to experience it with all the senses. Merleau-Ponty strengthens this by stating that meaning and memory can only be extracted through a multi-sensory experience with our immediate environment.<sup>23</sup> He refers to the way we exist in the world, interacting with it through our whole body. All our senses need to be engaged at the same time in order to perceive fully, giving rise to the notion of perception which contributes to our body knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Frasconi argues that buildings are no longer seen as cultural and social repositories but instead viewed as economic investments, temporal in their existence.<sup>25</sup> 'Real details' are replaced by 'virtual procedures' generic in their formation. He argues that details are no longer in synthesis to its locales, but instead encourage visual stimulation. Losing touch with details, results in a loss of meaningful perception, as it is through details that we perceive with our senses.<sup>26</sup> Pallasmaa makes further reference to the importance of details within spaces and our interaction with them, encompassing our whole body and all its senses.<sup>27</sup>

#### **5. Toward a Multisensory Approach**

The holistic interaction between space and that of the whole body is essential as it enables one to draw meaning from surrounding environments, as understood in terms of Gestalt psychology.<sup>28</sup> This holistic spatial conceptualisation may be broken up into sets of smaller design segments.<sup>29</sup> Smaller narratives allow for smaller interventions that may make the body aware of the topistic qualities of historical buildings and meaning of exhibition content. A set of interior design mechanisms may be used to create these nuanced interior interventions. These include: thresholds, openings, floor, wall and roof planes, lighting, and exhibiting mechanisms. In South Africa there exist a selected few examples that illuminate

and explicate how these mechanisms may be utilised to concretise a multisensory approach to interiors in significant historical buildings.

Museum van de Caab is situated within an old historical building, constructed around 1710, on the farm Solms-Delta in Franschoek, a historical French Huguenot settlement. The building has gone through several adaptations, the last occurring in 2008. The museum subjectively portrays the history of indigenous habitation, colonisation, slavery and apartheid on the farm and more broadly the Western Cape. The exhibition space is split in two. The first room is situated within the original wine cellar and oldest part of the building, dating circa 1710. Here the exhibition includes the history of mankind and special reference is made to the San and Khoi tribes, along with the history of slavery in South Africa. Recordings of extinct Khoi and San languages and music stimulate the hearing sense. The second room, constructed around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, addresses the history of the farm during apartheid onwards. It features a documentary film where interviews are conducted with farm workers and the owner of the farm, addressing the rise and fall of apartheid and the impact thereof. The oldest part of the building features the most historic content, where-as the latest edition to the building features the most recent content. The two rooms are in juxtaposition with one another in their content, construction and interior. This gives rise to a holistic neutral platform through the contrasting elements of old against new, raw against manufactured and light against dark. The play on subdued lighting dims the visual sense, heightening the other senses. Wine tasting takes place in both rooms, allowing for the incorporation and stimulation of the senses taste and smell. This enables for a multi-sensory environment that provokes all the senses. Through this confrontation with the bodily senses the topistic characteristics of the farm and the meaning of the exhibition content resonates within the occupant on a multisensory level.

## **5. In Conclusion**

Interior architects have an important role to play in countering the eradication of place globally. Meaningful and significant places exist within historical buildings, forming part of threatened cultural landscapes across the globe. The interiors of these buildings are subject to change and therefore spatio-temporal environments. A sensitive strategy is required to maintain the relevance of significant historical buildings, whilst allowing for internal fluctuation. Many design approaches exist in this regard.

In South Africa some interiors exhibit qualities of nostalgia and sentimentality. This approach is appropriate for certain interiors such as Groot Constantia and The Castle of Good Hope as these buildings function as museums. Although these interiors are somewhat theatrical, anachronistic and often haunted, their content is authentic and therefore strengthens the meaning and significance of the place. In cases such as the District 6 museum, the execution of this approach is less successful as exhibition content is superficially applied. It does not do justice to the

traumatic events that are implied by the locale and narrated through the exhibition content. Indeed, the only aspect of this museum that is of relevance to District 6, is its geographical location.

Other interiors seem to represent a rupture from the past and negate all topistic characteristics of their locales. In the case of the Rotondo Di Via Besana, the significance of the building is temporarily masked by means of fleeting interior interventions. The topistic character of the interior is hereby preserved and the relevance of the building maintained as it allows for ever changing meaningful place-making. In the case of the Michael Stevenson gallery, the interior intervention permanently erases the past. This could be seen as a positive intervention in this particular case, as the interior allows for the previously insignificant and unutilised historical interior to now function as an engaging and at times sensory environment through its content. In the What If The World gallery, this approach is less applicable as the contemporised interior resides in a historically significant building and thus negates its meaning.

Reflective criticisms cannot take sides on the positions discussed above. The critic needs to engage in a pointed dialogue between these positions. This dialogue may be grounded in phenomenology as the relative merits of these approaches lies in bodily experience and use of locales. This implies a multi-sensory approach to interior design, which has the potential to create environments that are not purely visual but also spatially moving. This multi-sensory approach can be exercised through the application of a set of interior design mechanisms. How these mechanisms may be employed should be illuminated and explicated by means of further investigation of successful multi-sensory environments.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), XIII.
- <sup>2</sup> Juhani Palasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture of the Senses* (London: Wiley, 1996), 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Eugene V. Walter refers to the term *topistic* to be understood as an adjective normally associated with *place*. *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988), 20.
- <sup>4</sup> Ernst F. Shumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
- <sup>5</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- <sup>6</sup> Spatio temporal refers to exists in both time and space.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.

Ocularcentrism refers to the visual sense taking predominance over the other senses.

<sup>9</sup> Maire E. O'Neill, 'Corporeal Experiences: A Haptic Way of Knowing', *Journal of Architectural Education* (2001): 3-12.

<sup>10</sup> *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (Burwood: Australia ICOMOS, 1999). The Burra Charter is a set of guiding principles specifically aimed at the conservation and management of cultural significant places. South Africa's local version of a heritage regulatory body is SAHRA.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *Poetry of Architecture Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: BiblioBazaar, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> The Burra Charter, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>15</sup> Significance is a key concept here, as old buildings are not necessarily significant and significant buildings are not necessarily old.

<sup>16</sup> Nic Coetzer, *Exploring 'Place-making', City Squares and Other Places: Cape Town's Pre-apartheid Spatial Politics* (Johannesburg: Art Historical Work Group, 2008), 146.

<sup>17</sup> Body-memory, the notion that the body has the ability to store memories instead of just the brain. Joseph Dean, 'The Great Divide', *The Architectural Review* (London: EMAP Publishing Limited, 2013): 18 -19.

<sup>18</sup> Disneyfication is the transformation of something real or unsettling into carefully, controlled and safe entertainment or environment with similar qualities.

<sup>19</sup> Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib. 'Modernity vs Post Modernity', in *New German Critique*. (1981).

<sup>20</sup> Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*.

<sup>21</sup> Facadism is term used when when everything but the façade is demolished.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



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- <sup>25</sup> Marco Frascari, 'The Tell-the-Tale Detail', in *Theorising a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princetown Architectural Press, 1996), 501.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 503
- <sup>27</sup> The multi-sensory approach by Pallasmaa is discussed here by Mohammadrizza Shirazi, 'Architectural Theory and Practice, and the Question of Phenomenology' (PhD diss., Brandenburgischen Technischen Universität Cottbus, 2009), 129.
- <sup>28</sup> Jean Piaget and Baerbel Inhelder. *The Child's Conception of Space* (London: Routledge, 1956).
- <sup>29</sup> Philosopher Lyotard, argues that 'grand narratives' are out of tune with the temper of our multicultural, post-colonial world. What is needed is a set of smaller narratives'. Similarly, Neo-plasticism, an approach which was used by Scarpa as a method of introducing contemporary interventions into historical settings, breaks big components up into smaller segments.

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**Barend Slabbert** is currently a Masters candidate in Interior Design. He has lectured at KLC School of Design, London, and currently lectures full-time at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town.

**June Jordaan** is a professional architect and lecturer at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town. Her research interests include architectural theory, phenomenology, place and haptic perception.