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Hannah Le Roux is director of the Architecture programme in the School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Her PhD, lived modernism (KU Leuven) revisited the modernist project in architecture in Africa, and considered how this frame and its transformation through the agency of African users present a conceptual model for contemporary design. This project arises from lived experience of the radical appropriation of space in reaction to apartheid and colonial constructions. The consequences are reflected in her photographic, written, exhibited and designerly work, with published projects for Bloemenhof Park, Upat and KwaThema.

Portrait with coffee: incipient architectures in the frame of Jeppe

Hannah le Roux



abstract

The challenging question around the nature of contemporary African architecture is one that I've mulled over coffee in the Habesha (Ethiopian and Eritrean) downtown area of Johannesburg for the last few years. In this zone, over just a decade, immigrant traders and their networks have transformed empty buildings into a heterogeneous area supporting every aspect of selling and living in the city.

Rather than reducing the nature of this area to migrant space, or appropriated modern space, or temporal architecture, this context stimulates a more complex discussion of what is going on in an area that is generally seen as chaotic. In this discussion, the intersection between a number of conditions, namely human mobility, the physical residue of the built, the extreme social agency of marginalised space makers, and the touchstones of the artefacts both moved and appropriated, can be seen as the material of incipient architectural genres.

The presentation will both describe this Habesha environment and its construction, and suggest ways to codify it through these observed conditions and their interaction. It will also relate the area in an associational way to historical spatial formations as well as extremely contemporary and forthcoming ones. In the process, the paper will suggest that Johannesburg, as it transforms from the binaries of apartheid city forms, holds the traces and promise of emergent African architectural languages.