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ARCHITECTURE IN MOTION

The Director of research, publishing and placemaking company The City, Zahira Asmal, considers the function of the Africa Architecture Awards and the ways in which architects might create future spaces, places and cities that facilitate the movement of ideas

In addition to my day job as Director of The City, I have the honour of serving as advisor to the Africa Architecture Awards. The awards have an ambitious aim: ‘to celebrate design excellence and promote an increased awareness of the role and importance of architecture across Africa’. What appeals to me is the inclusion of a ‘critical discourse’ category alongside the ‘built’, ‘speculative’ and ‘emerging’ categories.

The addition of this category outlines a clear mission to include a range of professions that intersect with architecture. It also shows that the awards go beyond backslapping and look deeper into the development of architectural craft. Ultimately, this elevates architectural discourse and highlights the accountability of architecture professionals in the pursuit of making better buildings, spaces and cities in our urbanising, globalised world.

It also honours the important work undertaken by entities (and individuals) that engage with the built environment. There is a general understanding that governments make cities. Since my time working with David Adjaye on his book, *Adjaye Africa Architecture*, I have been preoccupied with the role of architecture in making cities. I often questioned David about this – ‘What if this idea were located at the core of making spaces, places and cities? What would be the architect’s role? Who would write the brief?’ Our dialogues have informed my thinking in relation to placemaking in African cities.

There is a new force of ideas exchange emerging. Rapid technological development, increased global travel and immediate media access facilitates fast and wide-reaching communication, which means that there is expanding connectivity in the world. This also means that the frameworks underpinning how we engage have changed. Ideas formulate within the context of an evolving local-global paradigm and the power of ideas is moving rapidly beyond borders. Ideas move as people move; they invigorate places through an infusion of new perspectives. It is ultimately these ideas that make inclusive spaces, places and cities of the future.

A rigorous interrogation of our histories, traditions and cultures should be undertaken. Ideas that are developed in this way are inclusive and constructive. Only when understanding and engaging takes place at the intersection of geography, culture, old and emerging identities and equally represented histories will the ideas that develop be sustainable.

My advice to architects has always been to write the brief and imagine the world for future societies. The aim is to go beyond the ‘request for proposal’ and tender-based systems currently available; to move beyond the role of facilitator-and-promoter of someone else’s ideas. Instead, architects should reimagine spaces, places and cities that facilitate the movement of ideas.

Architects are in a unique position to widen the platform for exchange to include people from differing backgrounds who share common interests and to instigate a flow of ideas between formal and informal sectors, vulnerable groups, artists and curators – in addition to government, corporate entities and other powerful decision makers. Rather than creating places that highlight difference and contribute to marginalisation, architects should work with others to create places where collaborative ideas can flourish and new societies can form. We should not be limited by present opportunities; rather, we should focus on future possibilities.

The Africa Architecture Awards celebrates design excellence and promotes awareness of the role and importance of architecture across Africa. Read about the winners and find out about the ceremony held at Zeitz MOCAA on elledecoration.co.za