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Cape Town World Design Capital 2014: Mapping Memories and Design at Harrington Square

Abstract

“Cape Town is again reinventing itself, and the world is invited to its renaissance”

The contestations over memory-led versus design-led projects during World Design Capital 2014, when Cape Town was the host city of an international design event, is the focus of this paper. Design in the city is examined in order to understand the positionality of various groups laying claim to urban spaces focusing on a specific site, Harrington Square in the CBD. Two District Six Museum buildings are situated in the Cultural Heritage Precinct also known as the East City with a section that was rebranded the Fringe in Cape Town in 2012. The paper shall explore how particular urban planning policies applying design in the city led the District Six Museum to define its role more broadly, adopting “tactical” design strategies sensitive to the memories of District Six and the remaining urban fabric. A particular focus is on how “conflicting rationalities” emerged as the District Six Museum claimed that World Design Capital driven projects, namely the Fringe reflected “an absence of memory”. Research and design by the Museum in various media was harnessed to memory work as a form of activism, place making, and historical knowledge dissemination. The museum moved memorialisation into the East City to encompass the landscape between its buildings in Buitenkant Street and District Six in order to establish social spaces and historical places for District Six memorialisation. Standing and demolished landmark buildings entered the museum’s discourse as the landscape changed to generate a wider understanding of changing social, historical, political and cultural patterns. Issues of gentrification and urban heritage renewal in shaping histories of District Six and the city are analysed with reference to District Six Museum design methodologies and a World Design Capital iterative project. Redevelopment in the eastern CBD area was aligned to the objectives of the East City Creative Industries being driven by the Cape Town Partnership funded by the City of Cape Town becoming one of 77 design-led city projects in 2014. As the Museum contested, participated and experienced World Design Capital my argument is that the museum was later influenced by the potentials of global and local design applications. The museum had existing design frameworks through its exhibitions, buildings and produced a range of designs that represented a cultural brand. However, the museum adopted new design strategies and visual directions as a result of World Design Capital through its association with Ogilvy & Mather’s Cape Town design team. Renaming, design practices and occupation by different groups, who identified themselves as a community in Cape Town’s East City altered the identity of the area. Alternative notions and interpretations of space, identity and design emerged, were claimed and contested in the city.