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Fernanda Pinto de Almeida

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ESSAY



Seeing with the “Mother Theatre”: the sea and cinemas of Cape Town’s city centre

Fernanda Pinto de Almeida

Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I consider the building and demolition of the Alhambra, once known as Cape Town’s Mother Theatre, as a way of approaching the transformations of the city centre in the twentieth century. I show how city planning schemes and segregation policies transformed the central district’s cinema theatres – particularly the area informally called “Theatreland” – and proposed alterations to the seashore land that restricted pedestrian access from and to the sea. My essay identifies three moments that ordered these configurations of the central district and its cinemas, and how they became implicated in the city’s competing aesthetic projects. Cinemas, I argue, offer an important lens onto urban transformations in Cape Town, particularly in relation to the city’s maritime connections and the construction of the Foreshore. I trace these “cinema-scapes,” from their metropolitan ties to civic nationalist symbolism, and the different imaginaries of the public in Cape Town which, I suggest, inform a contemporary nostalgia for cinema.

KEYWORDS

Cinema; sea; Foreshore; Civic Centre; forced removals; segregation

Introduction

“Even the ghost needs a new haunt.” This was the *Cape Times* headline in October 1970, which anticipated the closure of the Alhambra Theatre in Riebeeck Street, central Cape Town, also known as the city’s “mother theatre” (*Cape Times* 1970). It was a reference to the ghost of Mickey Ward, the Alhambra’s first stage manager, who would have to find a new stage to haunt along with audiences, films and performers. Ward’s ghost reportedly appeared on the stage whenever a performance happened and became part of the theatre’s fascination. Designed by South African architect Percy Rogers Cooke in 1928 as the first “atmospheric” in the country, the Alhambra was built by African Theatres Company as “Africa’s new Wonder Theatre” (Gutsche 1972, 210), with its fake stars in a mock-sky ceiling adding an other-worldly element to musical performances and British pantomimes. In 1972, the image of the Alhambra’s stars drowning in the stage’s debris populated Cape Town’s newspapers and public imagination, fuelling a particular kind of nostalgia for the cinema. This essay approaches the Alhambra Theatre as a lens to the transformations of Cape Town’s “Theatreland” of the 1930s and 1940s. The Alhambra’s destruction in the 1970s reignited debates about public spaces, how they should be occupied and enjoyed,



Figure 1. The Alhambra theatre before demolition. Credit: Western Cape Archives and Records Services (AG17117). Reproduced with permission.

as well as a palpable connection between the city and the sea, whereby the cinema's physical location offered a promise of cosmopolitan connections. At the same time, I suggest that the era of the palatial cinemas, and the cinema district it consolidated, was set against smaller local bioscopes and expressed a limit of who – in racial and class terms – could inhabit the cinema and the city, and thus how this space could convey respectability. My analysis considers the modes of perception and senses enabled by the first “atmospheric” theatre built in the city and after its demolition, how the rubble of the Alhambra returns in projects of land reclamation.

The paper identifies three moments that offer different configurations of the city and cinema, and thereby, addresses competing aesthetic projects of Cape Town's central district. The first considers the rise of palatial cinemas in the late 1920s as a hallmark of the formation of cinema publics in the Cape and the latter's transnational film industry. It also marks the early twentieth century's geological transformations of the shorefront, including the eventual destruction of a popular pedestrian pier in 1932. The second situates the reclamation of seashore land that began in the 1940s and the formation of a so-called “Civic Centre” on reclaimed land. I approach how Afrikaner nationalists associated cinema houses with the evils of “bioscope culture,” justifying their public attack on cinema's purported moral corrosiveness and a religious threat to “divinely ordained differences between nations” (cited in Campbell 1998, 21). The third and last moment was pivoted by the demolition of the Alhambra in 1972 and the emphasis of English print media on the theatre's spectrality and afterlife. I argue that this final moment shows how cinema houses were produced by and shaped Cape Town's urban imagination. At this moment, the Alhambra becomes a figure through which the exclusivity once promised could be mobilised. I argue that the nostalgia for



Figure 2. Foundation stone for Van Riebeeck Festival’s Gateway to Africa, Cape Town, 1952. Credit: African News Agency (ANA) archives. Reproduced with permission.

the Alhambra sought to oppose symbolically the city’s most extensive land reclamation project with the creation of the Foreshore. But this nostalgia also glossed over exclusionary and racist policies that preceded Apartheid and the destruction of the central district’s designated “black cinemas.” In this sense, both the white English-speaking press’s longing for the Mother Theatre and the contempt for it that Afrikaner nationalists initially expressed reflect the ambivalence of appropriating cinemas for distinct political ends.

Thus, I follow Masilela’s (2000, n.p.) call to examine cinema “with the force with which they poetically graph on the cultural plane of history.” Moreover, as Masilela suggests, in South Africa this comes at the expense of those who have had their “cultural means of production” expropriated and imposed a form of cultural hegemony. Considering this, my method shifts the focus from films to cinema houses themselves, their position in the city and the interior and exterior elements that attempt to produce, as Kracauer shows in 1920s Berlin, an “assault” on the senses (1995, 328). Its interior achieves a form of psychological “inhabitation” that emerges amidst the buzzing of the street and house, between the arrest of bureaucracy and rationalising demands of the market. Following a cultural analysis of the movie palace, my approach in the larger project from which this essay emerges draws precisely on the dynamics between cinema’s arrest within boundaries of segregation and the promise of cinemas and “palaces of sensations” of taking audiences elsewhere (Pinto de Almeida 2020). Drawing from this project, my essay gestures towards what historical imagination and the projection of anti-colonial futures owe to the cinematic.

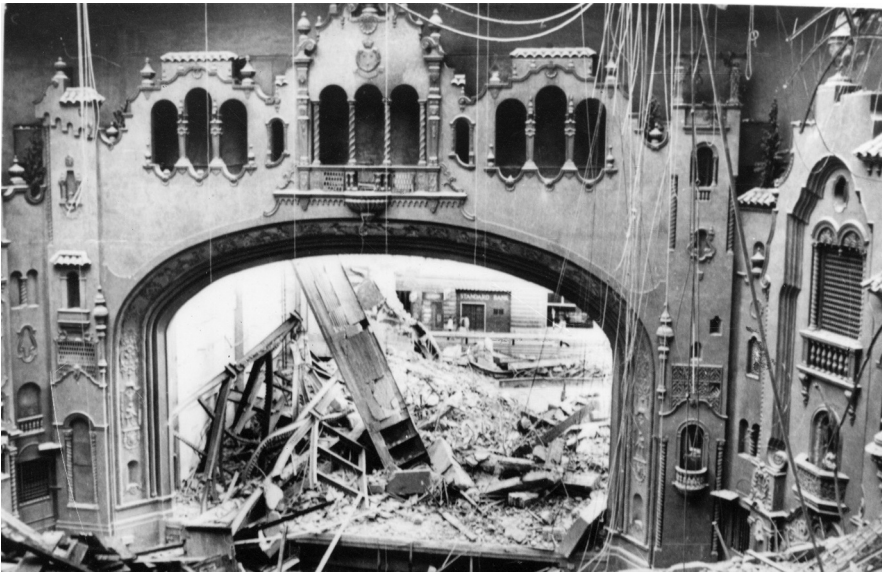


Figure 3. The stage and interior of the Alhambra during demolition. Credit: Western Cape Archives and Records Service (AG117118).

Cape Town cinemas and the making of the Alhambra

In the early twentieth century, passengers on ships and their crews landed in Cape Town, with the beach joining the City Centre at the end of busy Adderley Street. At the time when Cape Town was marketed to European travellers as the “Gateway to Africa” and welcomed many tourists, the Adderley Pier was its main attraction. Small cinemas appeared close to the seashore in Rogge Bay: these were small venues, with seats, bioscope screenings, operators and reels brought directly from Britain in shipments. As “an introduction to the empire,” to borrow from Burns (2009, 3), cinema was a powerful catalyst of cultural entertainment in the city, and the preferred medium of mass scale urban leisure. South Africa housed an impressive number of cinema theatres, with a total of 300 estimated by 1918, the majority of which were in Cape Town. Burns suggests that 3% of a population of 172,000 attended small bioscopes daily (3). These smaller exhibition venues were typically readapted amenities, and were fairly small in size and capacity, but their names – the Empire, the Royal Theatre, West End, British Bioscope – as Nasson (2016, 166) puts it, “dripped with the promise of glamour or old imperial splendour.”

The names of such establishments perhaps belied that these were far from places of the colonial establishment. They soon became known as “flea-pits,” and early attempts to segregate certain bioscopes as exclusively “European” were met with protests by Coloured and African patrons. Indeed, the early bioscopes became signs of the dangers of miscegenation and white degradation. In a passage of a book quoted by Vivian Bickford-Smith, a Natalian describes his visit to Cape Town in 1911, through a common scene in which.



Figure 4. The stage and interior of the Alhambra during demolition. Credit: Western Cape Archives and Records Service (AG117119).

[t]he doors of a bioscope are open and the crowd waiting admission and jostling each other as they get tickets includes representatives of every colour . . . and if he enters the overcrowded room . . . he will find no distinction made, and every colour occupying the same seats, cheek by jowl, and sometimes on each other's knees. (Bickford-Smith 1989, 61)

The crowded bioscope was increasingly seen as a place unsafe for “respectable” white families and children. Cinema was mobilised in cautionary tales about indistinct urban publics displaying indecent behaviour and using alcohol, a concern, Gutsche (1972, 105) argues, that sought to mobilise more policing and more government regulation. Cinema had not only become the entertainment choice among the urban youth, exposing them to “objectionable images,” but the buildings themselves represented a fire risk. Gutsche contends that in 1913

women were molested in the best bioscopes and in the more impoverished districts, women themselves brought their babies and attended to their comfort under most unhygienic

circumstances. Unaccompanied children screamed, quarrelled and fought, running about as they pleased and coloured people frequently mingled with white.(131)

The untidiness of the crowd, the blurriness of class and racial boundaries and its potential for corruption was only matched by the material conditions of the bioscope, as “in an unventilated hall frequently packed with vociferous humanity, the fetid atmosphere was often almost unbearable” (131).

These public anxieties over what the cinema was inaugurated a period of disputes between government, civil society and an emerging transnational reel trade that had stakes in cinema becoming a respectable and safe entertainment option for affluent families. By the 1920s, public health concerns were mobilised to foster more stringent forms of control over their patrons, including attempts to enforce segregation. Strict regulation of venues, control of fire hazards and of capacity attempted to produce a public that was discernible in terms of class and race. Cinema was turning into a legitimate business and attracting investments, and “palatial” establishments that combined theatre of varieties and pictures were in demand. One such venue was also named Alhambra by the South African Cinematograph Company at the end of St George’s Street, by the sea.

Facing the rising costs of American film imports responding to the decline of European production, distribution translated into huge commercial costs to cinema businessmen, such as the New York financier Isadore Schlesinger (Campbell 1998, 9). Moving to Johannesburg from New York following the Gold Rush, Schlesinger bought many small bioscopes and theatres before he established a monopoly of film importation and distribution and founded South Africa’s first film studio in Killarney (Parsons 2009, n.p.). First World War propaganda also found a vehicle in the cinemas of the Cape to the extent that the latter became a space for public demonstrations of support and even military enlistment, with cinema-goers volunteering in war enlistment campaigns (Burns 2009, 2). The close relationship between cinema and war spilled into and through pictures in Cape Town, where patrons watched newsreels of the South African War, the first filmed war.

As a respected cinema owner responsible for the success of vaudeville theatres and small bioscopes in Cape Town, Joe Fisher begun importing and distributing patriotic British films in the mid-1910s and attempted to take over film distribution in the Cape by collecting the revenue for British war films and gathering proceeds for the Governor-General’s war fund (Gutsche 1972, 155 n55).¹ Schlesinger not only attempted to withhold its own imports from Fisher but also punished independent exhibitors who showed Fisher’s products. The government was then obliged to Fisher’s distribution network composed mainly of small community halls.² Fisher tried to establish a bioscope chain, allegedly worth a hundred thousand pounds, with Sir Harry Hands, then mayor of Cape Town, as Chairman of the Board of Directors. In 1917, Fisher returned from New York on board the *City of Athens* steamship when it struck a German raider’s mine on the coast of South Africa. He survived, but his consignment of imported pictures was lost to the sea. Despite Fisher’s grand ambition the firm claimed Voluntary Liquidation and a million-sterling business sank with it.

Other competitors of Schlesinger crossed the ocean to attract investment in the South African cinema market while Schlesinger sought to monopolise exhibition circuits by

buying small cinemas and building new, bigger ones, with the hopes of addressing elite concerns about venues. When Schlesinger paired up with architect Cooke in Pretoria in the 1920s, they decided to import the dreamlike world of atmospheric cinemas that were a success in the United States. Cooke designed a palatial building in “Orientalist style,” with original lighting and lavish furniture interior that, as Gutsche (1972, 221) would put it, “endowed the showing of films with a wonder surpassing any they had previously possessed.” During a long research trip to investigate modern cinema design in 1927, architects took to sea to search for the latest cinema designs in the US, where cinema architect John Ebersson had popularised the atmospheric. It was reportedly in New York City, at the office of Thomas Lamb, architect of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, that Cooke designed Cape Town’s new Alhambra (Cooke n.d.). Whereas the transatlantic connections of cinema pointed to the decline of palatial venues, with Americans facing the Great Depression and the symbolic purchase of “Empire” theatres declining in Britain, in Cape Town this architectural style appeared to promise “world-class” cinema entertainment.

In 1927, many companies were disputing African Theatres Company’s seeming monopoly of exhibition circuits in the city centre. Kinemas Company capitalised on the suspicion over American productions and offered more British films. The advent of “phonofilms” that anticipated the “talkies” or sound films, marked the introduction to sound technology synchronised with moving images. Gutsche suggests that South African audiences, accustomed to radio and other “modern tendencies” were “intoxicated with noise” and the showing of talkies was highly anticipated. When Africa Theatres opened the Alhambra in 1929, it was the opportunity to showcase a feature length talkie, Al Johnson’s *The Singing Fool*. It was not exactly a technological success for the “talkie,” as Gutsche describes, but it still mesmerised audiences with the grandiosity of its inauguration ceremony:

A distinguished audience filled the theatre; the performance began with Gladys Daniels singing the National Anthem; there followed a fanfare of trumpets arranged by Bandmaster Rendle V.C.; the Mayor of Cape Town the Reverend AJS Lewis introduced the Administrator of the Cape Province, Mr JH Conradie who performed the opening ceremony; and a programme began. *The Singing Fool* did not make much impression (its “sobstuff” evoked much contumelious comment) and it ran for less than two weeks which, by Kinemas’ standards, was not long (though of course the capacity of the Alhambra far exceeded any Kinemas). Misadventure befell the performances and once *The Singing Fool* went silent. The attractions of the new theatre however (particularly its Spanish decoration, the twinkling stars and moving clouds on the ceiling and the first “Mighty Wurlitzer” played by Max Bruce) were sufficient to assure packed audiences. (Gutsche 1972, 210)

Despite the arguable audio fiasco, the admission prices for the new talkie in the new atmospheric were reportedly high. This, Gutsche suggests, reflected how the stakes were higher. Whereas the bioscope had given audiences a medium through which to live “vicariously” through representations of celebrity and wealth, now audiences were experiencing it in cinemas: “[patrons] walked on thick-pile carpets, they sat in richly upholstered arm-chairs [*sic*], they beheld luxuriant and colourful decorations” (222). For Kinemas Company, a business that at the time had a small circuit of less sought-after bioscopes, the technological apparatus and performance became too expensive, but

Kinemas's showing of the first full-length film had large crowds in Johannesburg despite the Depression, demanding even police control. Both companies continued to expand their theatres in the entire city during financial depression before they declared a merger. In 1931, the vice president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer arrived in South Africa to negotiate a possible distributor and later announced the building of a so-called super-cinema chain. In the mid-1930s, three major companies were the players in South African cinema distribution and venues and the atmospheric had become ubiquitous in large cities in the country. The construction of the Alhambra thus consolidated what English media press called the "golden age" of cinema in Cape Town, marked by the construction of palatial venues in the city centre. Cape Town first cinema palaces' architectural style – that passed as "Spanish Renaissance," "Spanish Mission" or "Moorish" – pointed to imaginary places beyond Cape Town, so did its ushers, dressed in expensive tuxedos. What these places wanted to differ from, as Jeremy Lawrence remarks, was the familiar Cape-Dutch architecture (2018, n.p.).

A cinema for the *volk*: turning away from the Alhambra

In 1932, only a few years after the construction of the Alhambra, the Adderley pier was completely demolished and no direct pedestrian access to the sea was possible. The rapid growth of Cape Town's suburbs and the influx of cars to and from the city and the city centre district had become prohibitive for any construction of new cinemas, particularly given the monopoly of exhibition circuits in "Theatreland." As Afrikaner nationalists achieved public prominence cinemas were slowly recognised as potential venues for mobilising the formation of an Afrikaner cultural sphere (O'Meara 1982). Despite the National Party's ostensible discomfort with the kinds of sociality engendered in *bioskoopbeskawing*, or "bioscope culture," nationalists directed most of their public attack of cinemas on the latter's purported immorality and potential to dilute racial and class distinction (Gainer 2000, 142). This discomfort was partially abated in 1940, when leaders of the Broederbond published an investigation into leisure in the *Nasionale Pers* recommending the conversion of cinemas from their *volksvreemde* nature – foreign to the people – into *volkseie* – belonging to the people.

It was clear, following Gainer (2000), that the control of cinema venues was meant to police inter-class and interracial contact. But the substantial challenge of Afrikaner nationalists in and outside government was to develop modes of production and consumption of cultural goods that most appropriately embraced and expressed Afrikaner nostalgia. The comments column of the Afrikaans magazine *Die Huisgenoot*, were representative of how cinemas were seen as "agents of a foreign culture which claims for itself the right to overrun and conquer the world" (Campbell 1998, 21). Relating the merits of a national cinema production, Hans Rompel considered that a film industry should not be left to big corporations and in 1942 published the double volume *Die bioskoop in diens van die volk*, calling for a "bioscope" in service of the nation (Rompel 1942). He subsequently presided over the Afrikaner Amateur Motion Picture Organisation (Reddingsdaadbond-Amateur-Rolprentorganisasie or RARO) and, focusing on language, defended that the cultural products of Afrikanerdom should be housed by and reflected in smaller community-bound spaces (Steyn 2016). In other words, films

should reflect Afrikaner “laager” life’s contempt for productions “about big palaces, night clubs [and] pubs” (Rompel 1942, 58).

This turn to the cinema of the nation was not merely an anti-imperial demonstration – as in refusal to stand for the royal anthem after a film – but also disconnected cinema from its metropolitan ties, as with the Alhambra.³ Gutsche (1972, 271 n51) recounts how a reader of *Die Volksblad* in 1940 reports on how he and his wife were once regulars of the bioscope, seeing films once a week but since “jingo spirit prevailed and Empire propaganda in every possible form was stuck down our throats” they kept their bioscope money and “enclosed for the Reddingsdaad fonds.” This was a suitable opportunity for Rompel to mobilise these sentiments and demand a “bioscope” in the service of the nation. The latter would connect the aspirations of a white, national film production with the “spirit” of the Afrikaner *volk*.⁴ Different from the former atmospherics, Afrikaner bioscopes bore more modern features with a perceived “dignified simplicity.”⁵ At the time of the creation of RARO, the mayor of Cape Town launched a new variety of “super-cinema” showcasing an architecture with purported “distinctly South African flavour” and also, critically, “a happy contrast to the Alhambras, Colosseums, Plazas and Waldorf-Astorias which, without wishing to be offensive, might be considered *uitlanders*” (*Cape Times*, October 4 1952 cited in Gainer 2000, 144).

Cinemas were branded “uniquely South African” on their exterior. One such cinema was the Alabama, on the corner of Loop and Pepper Streets, considered a “non-white” cinema and the closest to the designated black area, the Bo-Kaap. As Gainer (2000) points out, it showcased North American technology from the air conditioning to its sound system and marked a new era of the Cape’s cinema aesthetic as the first black cinema in the city centre. Marketed to what was then called “non-European” audiences, its architecture “was peculiarly South African, housed in the restored Wicht Zaal building (foundation stone laid in 1889), formerly a church hall and a centre of cultural activities” (142–143). Films were also uniquely South African, with the state subsidising mainly Afrikaans films (those with at least 70% of their dialogue in Afrikaans). These films, as Riley (2012) shows, reflected the new regime’s desire to create and represent a form of “territorial identity” with the Cape landscape, mostly naturalising it through the spatial regulation and erasure of black areas and people.

In 1947, a year before the national elections that would define the political direction of the country, the city’s Central District became infused with a sense of historical urgency: it was a time to reframe the city centre as the departure for a narrative of white conquest in South Africa. At this point architects – including those who ostensibly opposed the Afrikaner nationalism – gained prominence in governing urban change. One of them was Roy Kantorovich, a professor at Wits University who joined the municipal government’s effort to transform Cape Town’s shorefront in a proposal submitted later in 1947 (Botha 2013, 65). He took part in a larger approach to urban planning of the city that mobilised sectors of Cape Town’s municipality to dispute or to accommodate the national policies of racial exclusion and dispossession. These municipal commissions also deliberated on the aesthetic appeal of the new Civic Centre, built “from scratch” from the reclaimed sea land in front of the city’s business district known as the Foreshore.

The city assembled the Foreshore Committee, of which Kantorovich became a member. He was unmistakably in favour of a systematic, controlled state intervention advised by a board of specialists about the aesthetic outline of national planning. For him,

the architectural form of the modern city needed to be unified as a national aesthetic. By that he meant that façades should be a clear statement of spaces, and a function of its content and a sense of “honesty” and functionality were the key for a modern city as epitome of national cohesion. Cinemas, he suggested, should match in style, and create a continuum between facade and interior. Critically, Kantorovich (1943) reinforced the architect’s role in the aesthetic remaking of the Foreshore with the Civic Centre as its feature and as the “gateway” to the new nation.⁶ The national state would perform a fundamental role in this idea of a modern design fashioning a civic spirit, as it promised to unify aesthetically a city whose parts did not seem to add up. If the businessmen and urban planners and citizens were left to their own devices in *laissez-faire* governance, the idea of the civic was in danger: buildings of different periods and styles could eventually topple the civic grandeur of unifying piazzas or town squares or curtail the public potential of City Halls and other civic buildings.

An obvious axis of this narrative was the sea, but the latter was ultimately entangled in British expansion and the position of South Africa in the political geography of imperial wars. Another axis was the move from the sea to interior represented by the founding myth of Jan Van Riebeeck’s settler society. This civic nationalist project turned to a romantic colonial past and cleared the city centre terrain for Afrikaner economic interests and urban aspiration, which distinguished itself from the English-speaking leisure class. The Afrikaans Christian Filmmaking Organisation indeed had a specific aim, to “[socialise] the newly urbanized Afrikaner into a Christian urban society” (Tomaselli 1985, 25). What was suggested is that cinema’s imperial ties and cultural connection with Hollywood were to be surpassed by a state-led development of the industry that turned both films and venues in South Africa to the *binneland* and an “uncorrupted” urban society to fit in a nationalist project.

In 1950, under Apartheid, the government promulgated the Group Areas Act, demarcating areas in the city according to each of its classified racial groups. In public discourse, the administration of Cape Town increasingly deployed the language of public health to warn about the risks of unrestricted development, which resonated with nineteenth-century social engineering projects enacted under public concern for sanitation. Denouncing the city’s purported aesthetic decay, official discourse turned these areas into urban maladies with purported “overcrowded buildings, spiderwebs of tram and electricity lines, advertising billboards everywhere, unsightly architectural styles . . . pedestrians competing for space with vehicles, the loss of public space to cars and buildings, and a lack of green areas to create sites of leisure” (Botha 2013, 88). These “unsightly” elements included black working-class neighbourhoods, with buildings categorised as overcrowded and unsanitary and therefore a public health hazard that called for government intervention. Forced removals of entire neighbourhoods were carried out in the name of “slum-clearing” and “urban renewal” and the city was summarily declared “white.”

Amidst these transformations, Afrikaner nationalists viewed the central district as a stage onto which to reformulate narratives of origins and to reformulate the founding myth of white nationhood. The pinnacle of this “cultural reboot” was the enactment of the arrival of Jan Riebeeck, celebrated in a public festival for the masses in 1952 and which Witz (2003) has called “Apartheid’s festival.” In this newly founded white country the city centre became a springboard for Afrikaner reconstruction turning itself into

a colonial monument. The Foreshore became a site on which the emerging Monumental Approach appealed to South Africa's public imagination, in conjunction with the City Beautiful aesthetics that produced an arterial connection between (white) suburbs and grand axes leading to a Civic Centre. A suitable Modernist design had "clean, pure lines that symbolized design and space free of physical and mental clutter" (Botha 2013, 94). Following Nicholas Botha, as monuments to a particular Afrikaner reading of industrial modernity, new buildings used "materials emblematic of the industrial age, steel, glass and concrete," and avoided "plaster and stone embellishments of the Classical or Art Deco styles."

The material and immaterial relations of architecture and town planning together defined the civic "spirit" of the times in the Foreshore: this new juncture formed at the intersection of architectural beauty and functionality.⁷ This represented, the coupling of a *volk* consciousness and nationalist aesthetic. White Afrikaner worker's influx to the city also introduced competing visions of a white city and the shape of its purported "centre" that reframed the debate of nationalist versus metropolitan sensibilities.⁸ While ostensibly critical of Apartheid and suspicious of the ornamental – Kantorovich explicitly associated ornamentation and the threat of fascism (1943, 106) – his architectural designs were taken up in the nationalist redesign of the City Centre. The most emblematic of these new style cinemas was the Van Riebeeck Theatre, built in 1951 on the corner of Long and Riebeeck Street as a celebration of colonial narrative of the past and an architectural desire to incorporate "South African history into the walls of cinema" (Gainer 2000, 144).

Nostalgia for the Alhambra

The Civic Centre, as an idea, was formed through the relationship of the city with the sea and the aesthetic to planning and "order," with impresarios and architects using the platform of municipal politics to constantly push the removal of the railway line between city and the sea. The sea once represented "[t]he key anchoring element of the foreshore design, the entrance to the "Gateway to South Africa," and main focus point of any future civilian contact with the ocean on the foreshore" (Botha 2013, 76). The construction of a small harbour was the main interest of the city council, which would sever the contact between Cape Town and the sea. The disputes over the Foreshore would reflect the competing visions of Cape Town. "This was, symbolically," Worden (1994, 44) evocatively suggests, "the period in which 'they' took the sea away."

Thus, while the idea of the Civic Centre was purportedly one of inclusion, the main strategy was to connect the Foreshore with Parliament and make the city centre converge with the main square where a statue of Jan Van Riebeeck stood. Indeed, an ambitious project of flyover highways finally obstructed the sea view entirely, even if the highways themselves could never be completed. This refashioning helped to destroy other connections that exceeded the imaginary of anti-imperial nationalism, by disconnecting, critically, the trajectory of the South African *Klopse* Carnival from the Bo-Kaap to District Six. These connections represented "the symbolic link between work and home, leisure and commerce for the ideal (middle-upper class) citizen" (Botha 2013, 52). Moreover, by reimagining the Civic Centre as such, it contributed to erasing the varied ways in which black publics embraced cultural activities in the city and claimed a connection between

different but related black neighbourhoods, which previous regimes reduced to segregated enclaves. Analysing the city's forced removals of black neighbourhoods, notably the most pervasive of its iterations in District Six, Van Graan (2004) suggests that they operated as "a catalyst for spatial change and the dislocation of lived space" as a form of recreating the city centre as "modern" and "rational." This view considers Apartheid mobilisation of a "civic authority" alongside planners and architects as urban bureaucrats who deploy modernist aesthetics as an apparatus of control and displacement.

This was a distinct feature of twentieth century modernism – a site for a building or group of buildings that would symbolise the central power of its citizens. Such centres would include administrative and cultural buildings – as evidenced in the earlier conception of the City Hall, which functioned as offices and, with its hall, as a venue for the Cape Town Orchestra. (Botha 2013, 49)

The 1950s and 1960s were marked by the process of importing particular modes of urban inhabitation and design that were in line with the project of Afrikaner nationalism and the emerging "Afrikanerisation" of the Foreshore. A government-led board was created to manage the political aspirations of the Foreshore, and an opportunity to showcase it alongside the purported origins of white nationhood came with the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival. Botha (2013) suggests that an important motif to architects for a few years after the festival was "the theme of visions and 'utopias'" that formed the exhibition called "Cape Town, Your City," an affirmation of the Modernist-inspired aesthetic indexing the latest, modern design as "the guarantor of efficiency, progress and human satisfaction." The removal of black citizens as undesirable elements of the city deems them not-yet modern by virtue of their incapacity to inhabit the city centre and, consequently, perform civility (Van Graan 2004, 74–5). Besides the reassertion of civic authority, the sea was also being claimed. Botha (2013, 38) suggests that "none of the schemes imagine what the lived experience of the city would be like for pedestrians" and thus "the city becomes an object to be admired from a distance, not lived in or physically experienced on a daily basis."

With atmospherics both a political target and economically difficult to sustain because of their size – especially as they became less fashionable – the new Nico Malan Theatre was set to become an icon of the gist of hope that Afrikaner capital represented. Built in 1971, the Nico Malan – or "Nico" – was a response to a supposed demand for an Opera House in the Foreshore's Civic Centre, and a yearning for a "proper" Afrikaner theatre in the city, markedly apart from cinema enterprises.⁹ The Nico Malan Theatre was marketed as inclusive and therefore used tax revenue from both "Coloureds" and "Europeans," causing an uproar when it was later designated "white-only." The bioscope section of the foreshore would in fact be granted with a separate, not so glamorous, and likely segregated enclave.

By the late 1960s, the Alhambra was slated for demolition, one of many targets of government demolition at the time. In 1969, the *Cape Times* (1969) published an "interview" with the spectre of Reuben Alexander, designer of the Alhambra's famous revolving stage. Reportedly anxious, he gazed at Cape Town's skyline "very sore about that magnificent building coming down" and lamented that "[the Alhambra] is as solid as they come, and I can assure you the demolishers will have a heck of a job pulling them down!" The ghost seemed to be right. One month into demolition in 1972, the Alhambra

ruins still captured the attention of newspaper readers, cinemagoers and the site's passers-by. The eerie photograph of a pile of rubble sitting where the stage once was, produced cartoons, newspaper stories, encouraged apparitions and elicited a long-lasting nostalgia. That year, the image of the Alhambra stars drowning in the theatre's own debris would populate Cape Town's newspapers and the readers' imagination. Such nostalgia was recuperated as heritage in the 2000s, when Cape Town's Grand West Casino produced a replica of the "sorely missed" Alhambra. While on the surface these historical resurfacings seem meaningless, Ingg (2014, 33) suggests, they do follow a politico-aesthetic desire to "start over" and that way reflect "the post-apartheid shift to conceptualising spaces and places as nodes of connection, rather than areas of disconnection and division." The Grand West land, evocatively enough, had reportedly been the site of the famous Goodwood Drive-in during the last decades of Apartheid.

In the 1980s, as much of the English-speaking press nostalgia for the Mother Theatre subsumed, and the national government showed signs of political decline, a growing mobilisation for a potential re-flooding of the Foreshore land gained momentum. By the middle of the decade, the sea started to inspire a more nostalgic approach to issues of planning and the idea of revitalisation of the basin area started to attract the interest of developers. The *Argus* featured an article in 1984 titled "Bringing the waterfront back to the city," showing two architecture students from the University of Cape Town who had received awards to re-flood parts of the Foreshore and reconnect the harbour with the city centre (cited in Worden 1994, 44). The University of Cape Town's Head of the School of Architecture declared to the press that they wished to see the "original shoreline of 1652 recreated and the Castle walls lapped by the sea." This came after an arguably collective realisation that the Foreshore represented "a disastrous example of reclamation . . . [so] Our plan . . . will create a link with the sea, something which is sadly lacking" (cited in Worden 1994, 34). While the re-flooding of the foreshore seemed overtly ambitious, a proposal to construct a Waterfront in 1988 consolidated the fantasy, in Worden's words, of a world free from Pretoria's domination. The sea shaped the longing for a world "teeming with atmosphere and vibrancy, shown by the replacement of sail by steam ships, the mail boats, passengers waved off at the quay sides . . . the pier and its orchestra, rowing boats, children swimming and fishing" (1994). But this, of course, Worden points out, is not what Cape Town used to be. It was instead a vision of the future from the lens of an imagined city.

The "old" cinema house represented an aesthetic excess, a disjuncture between surface and interior that should be historically surpassed. This disjuncture finds creative expression more recently in Philotheou's (2014) archaeology of Granger Bay. Exploring a late land reclamation project in the 1970s, west of Cape Town's Foreshore, this is the archaeology, in her words, of an unbuilding-to-build: she is set to discover what she identifies as that place's *genius loci*, grounded in rubble and the stories of the buildings that make up the common ground. Following this she allowed the landscape to inform and generate a unique architectural language, she claims, that blurs the boundaries of nature and human labour. Here "key informants" as she puts it (78), were "the various geometries and forces that act on the site: Fort Wynyard's sightlines, the buried natural landscape, the ocean, rubble ground." Another of Philotheou's "informants" was the rubble of the Alhambra.

In this urban archaeology, the call of rubble is a pragmatic one: the many layered, tide-like recurrences of historical fragments prompted a planned “response” to resurrect a public spirit through cinema. The answer seemed to be found in the sea. Philotheou designs an outdoor amphitheatre that would become a space to spend time and socialise when performances were not happening, when the stairs turned again into “the remaining bones of an activity and the carcasses of the lost Alhambra” (Philotheou 2014, 66). She also conveys the geometry of the Fort Wynyard in such a way that the site becomes “a spectral field of forces” whereby an idea “emerged to refashion the land and re-present the Alhambra theatre out of its own debris.” Philotheou’s (2014, 60) work is to “to let [the cinema] re-emerge from the ground.” An untouched landscape becomes the foil for her vision of the Mother Theatre returning to/as nature, and of concrete rubble as “bones,” in an area “dictated by the tides.” In her approach, the shoreline proposes a de-naturalised perception of the sea vacillating between an object of experience and a way of seeing that indexes, to paraphrase Baderon (2009, 94), both distance and desire.

Rubble, as Steinmetz (2019, 792) reminds us, is fundamentally open to differing representations. Steinmetz calls the latter “ruinscapes,” contrasting the efforts of making ruins meaningful with those of mere nostalgia. The “work of nostalgia here,” following Worby and Ally (2013), sets cinema in motion in a practice of coincident temporalities and enfolding. But why cinema, and why now? Lalu’s recent writings revive the “bioscope” in South Africa, and particularly Cape Town, as a temporal form that unfolds through “an expansive globality” and “a window on an ever-constricting world” beyond Apartheid (2017, 262). Cinema offers itself as both assemblage of rhythm and movement, temporal frames that exceed, for him, Apartheid’s “technology of subjection.” In a time when mobility was a luxury, argues Lalu (2017, 262), “the bioscope offered a ride.” Whereas at such crucial historical juncture assemblages of film exceed “technologies of subjection,” when the cinema gradually began to disappear in the 1970s, what also started to disappear, he argues, was the desire for a “non-sectarian future.”

Conclusion

In this essay I suggested that the Central District Theatreland did not succeed in forming, at least not in the sense that Kracauer (1995, 325) points to in Berlin, a homogenous cosmopolitan cinema audience, despite its attempt to mark a clear distinction of taste and the senses. Indeed, how cinemas were produced (and destroyed) became both a lens onto how the city segregated its populations and a means through which this segregation was achieved. And yet, seeing the central district through its “Mother Theatre” allows us to see cinema’s architectural form in relation to larger exclusionary approaches to urban renewal and planning. The interior of cinemas was more than mere protection from outside elements: it turned itself into a filter for the discernment of senses and feelings. Technological artefacts were not only woven in the fabric of ordinary life but also prompted forms of technological control that altered the experience of the metropolis. Film palaces became quasi-religious spaces, with technology promising heightened aesthetic devices combined with luxurious materials and technical novelty. While cinema’s “optical fairylands” became places where costly interior furniture blended into “refined artisanal fantasy,” it both drew upon and cut ties with live theatre and nostalgic longings for “a bygone culture” (Kracauer 1995, 325).

Inspired by Lalu's invitation of thinking with cinema, I approached Cape Town's central district in this essay specifically through the historical transformations of the Alhambra. This enabled new ways of engaging the imagination that cinema offered as well as its historical returns. Recently, the possibility of reconstructing the Adderley Pier reappeared in public discourse and the Foreshore emerged again as a contested space in the struggle for the right to the city in Cape Town (Weber 2018, 60). As a nostalgic project, the proposed Victoria & Alfred Waterfront became the market-driven epitome of a return of the sea that marked its purported glorious past. Its building is an expression of what Worden calls the "ethos of the Waterfront," a world imagined free from government but not from the forms of segregation and exclusivity the latter imposed. The shapes of that nostalgia, and the ways in which it relates to the sea, made a return precisely through the ambivalent figure of the "Mother Theatre" as a proxy for the Mother City as a global hub and its "topographies of erasure" (Grunebaum 2007). In very material ways, seascapes of cinema emerged from maritime exchange and transit, with the sea constituting a void between and within spaces in the city set in motion in the recent imagery of manifold "tidal detritus." Betraying nostalgia, the central district has been associated with detritus of its exclusionary, often traumatic formations: slave burial sites, markers of forced removals, bones, bodies, buildings (Shepherd 2007). Finally, the rubble of the cinema and its nostalgic recurrences set the tone for the city's history of racial and class exclusion and its disputed imaginaries of the future.

Notes

1. Fisher's Bioscope and Films Ltd. (1917). In it, cinema is described as a "touch of nature that makes the whole world kin."
2. The Fishers then started a nationwide import and distribution network that, in Gutsche's words, "greatly embarrassed African Theatres" (Gutsche 1972, n144; *Cape Argus*, December 7 1917, 3, cited in Parsons 2009).
3. The imperial ties were very explicit. Olivier (2016, n.p.) described childhood visits to the Alhambra and "a Wurlitzer Organ which rose up from the pits which played before the performance and during interval when a movie was played with the words of the songs with a bouncy ball going along the line to tell you when to sing. And of course, we all stood and sang "God save the Queen" at the end with black and white movies showing the Royal Family with scenes of their visit to South Africa in 1947."
4. Notably, the use of the bioscope terminology here also points to inversion of the late 1920s from the terminology of "bioscope" to "cinema" (see Gutsche 1972, 201).
5. Critically, for an approach to the formation of Afrikaans cinema publics, Steyn's (2016) analysis moves away from a discourse of consumption – only insofar as consumption here is already perceived as moving away from "big capital" or what I identify as metropolitan connections. Steyn, more interestingly, eschews from a consumption analysis to a coupling of notions of film's aesthetic formation and the formation of the "consciousness of a people" (*volksgevoel*) in Apartheid's vision of *volk* cinema.
6. Two years after the planning of the Foreshore, Kantorovich joined another South African architect, Norman Hanson, in the newly-founded state of Israel, more specifically in the neighbourhood unit Afridar, in the city of Ashkelon. Not irrelevant to the work of Kantorovich in Cape Town, Levin's (2019) account of the project suggests that even though it reflected a "semi-private settlement initiative for an ethnic and class-based enclave" destined mostly for Anglo-Saxon Jewish immigrants, it was modelled after progressive experiments in the design of townships in South Africa and represented a contrast with the model of Israel's centralised planning approach to possibly offer a more inclusive sense

of civic building. Managed by the South African Jewish Appeal, the project functioned as a “model town” for the integration of the immigrant population from the Middle East and North Africa. In spite of Kantorovich’s suggestion that Apartheid “should not be the essential feature of Israeli planning,” Levin argues that Afridar ended up reproducing Apartheid’s most infamous strategies.

7. Critically, Western (1981, 269) refers to the impossibility of forging a “new community spirit” under Apartheid, worsened by the public mobilisation of fear of new racial enclaves after forced removals.
8. For a broader approach to Afrikaner kitsch cf Lewis (2016) and Potgieter (2009). See also Krueger’s (2012) account of the aesthetic “zef” and the latter’s returns as “kitsch chic.”
9. The Nico Malan Theatre Complex (now Artscape) responded to the desires for a “world-class” theatre in the civic centre. While many Capetonians were reportedly in favour of maintaining the “old” Alhambra building, the Nico Malan was set to meet the new “cultural requirements” of the city centre and signal Cape Town’s “civic pride” in time for the 1971 Republic Festival (*Cape Times* 1969).

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Notes on contributor

Fernanda Pinto de Almeida received her PhD in history and was a fellow of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of Western Cape. She has written on mass media and cultural publics in South Africa.

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