

Art makes spaces human

South Africans are spoilt with open space. The open veld, the bush, the mountains... the scenic splendour we just about take for granted. But what about our city spaces?

Shopping spaces, public open spaces?

South Africans, unlike Europeans, do not seem to have a feel for their public open spaces. In the past much of what was done to enhance public spaces were used to further the wave of nationalism that swept the world. The same happened in Europe, yet they do seem to have a sense of wanting to beautify their environment, taken through from the Renaissance, which we are sadly lacking. Right across Europe open spaces are, as a rule, adorned by statues, fountains or other adorning elements.

Our own internationally acclaimed sculptor Angus Taylor, who lectures on public art at the University of Pretoria, says public art gives life to the spaces in which they are placed.

“Art makes of a space a particular place,” he says. “It activates the space in the same way a singer would do should he be singing there. Visual art though, has the ability to communicate, and to initiate thought processes.”

On the local level

Around Pretoria there are several examples that fall outside the realm of statues personifying nationalistic ideals. The statue in front of the Pilditch stadium, designed by Fanie Eloff several decades ago, exemplifies athletic excellence and is, of course, quite fitting in its context.

Yet what about creating beauty for the sake of beauty in a public setting?

An excellent example of this is the incredible 42 mural paintings of The Tannery Industrial Park in Silverton. Then owner of the park, Hein von Landsberg, saw the potential of painter Fourie Ackerman with whom he was acquainted. Ackerman showed his mettle in painting these murals, ranging in size from 2x3m to 30x5m over a five year period... and created in the interior of an inauspicious setting, almost tangible tableau's of the African bush.

Tourists and South Africans alike have come from far to view these artistic endeavours which are heralded when driving underneath the bridge in Dykor Rd. Bar the cars and the concrete one might feel one has reached the bushveld!

Ackerman says when painting the bridge, motorists hooted and shouted and stopped to ask his phone number. Eventually he painted his number at the bottom of the wall!

One might postulate that this could perhaps be the largest number of wall paintings in one enclosed area in the country.... Or perhaps even the Southern hemisphere!

Driving around Pretoria under the Jacaranda canopy suddenly one finds the mosaic depiction of these very trees in front of the National Cultural Museum. What a lovely touch of our very own – depicted and immortalised in such artistic fashion.

Unfortunately the Anton Smit statue at the National Library seems to have fallen prey to indifference. This statue was designed for a spacious setting and now is obscured by steel poles - and the setting is devoid of any meaning. Concrete plant boxes have been planted in this area, which could have been something pleasant had the statue been placed correctly and some seating had been arranged with trees? It seems that the sculptor's talent and toil has come to naught in this instance.

Sculptures like that of the cows seen in Irene Village Mall and now also Southdowns, is an example of how shopping spaces are evolving. Developers like Retail Africa and Atterbury ?? seem to be embracing the idea that shopping should be an experience.

Creating space where people can mingle and relax, such as the new Lynnwood Bridge Centre, augmented by sculptures which tell their own story and sets the tone in the space they are placed, does make the visitor embrace the space in a friendly way.

Lynnwood Bridge has two donkeys that seem so alive one might expect them to move if you should touch them! The standing donkey, explains sculptor Angus Taylor, is the classical anti-monument: not that of a man on a horse - but a woman on a donkey. This removes elitism and the fact that it is not raised, as monuments were, gives it a groundedness.

“Yet this statue is also ungrounded in the sense that it was not conceived as something rising from a given premise, but rather grew into its own premise in a deductive way. It is an open-ended artwork, which does not impose my meaning of the work as the only interpretation. Rather each person looking at this woman on the humble donkey will be reaching his or her own interpretation,” Angus explains.

The donkey lying peacefully amongst the water spouts, seems to be saying “I can relax and be patient, anywhere..... anyhow!”

Both these donkeys were cast with Angus’ own method of using rammed earth: a close-up look will show the blankets as textured quilts. This method, he says, is about using what is in nature, and to find material that resonates with the South African environment, like soil, grass and small stones.

“It is exciting to experiment with this: the conveyor of the meaning I intend, then becomes not only me as the sculptor, but the very material I use, as well.”

“This use of texture on the one hand and smoothness in other parts of the statues, indicates liminality – a sort of ‘in-between’ space: which is where South Africans find themselves now.”

Angus shows with the use of these textures that the farther you go outside the box, the smoother the textures become. A life philosophy worth contemplating..

Angus says that artists who produce public art have a great responsibility. “The substance and philosophy of the art should be sound. It should NOT be created with the premise of making a building pretty. Some of our present day shopping centre developers have gained the expertise to create spaces for people, and to make those spaces human.”

Clearly, there are those who understand public art and public spaces. The field is open. Hopefully others will follow in committing themselves to uplift our public spaces.