

JKWIS Essay III

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Architecture and Ideology

Architecture goes beyond reflecting the life that is lived in a particular geographical setting. It reflects the habits and beliefs of the people, to some extent. The Nelson Mandela Bridge—when closely studied—is an architectural and structural masterpiece that gives a peep into the ideology of the South African administration, and indeed the citizens.

The late Nelson Mandela was a national hero who was respected in South Africa and in the diaspora. He was a role model, mentor and a public figure. But the reason for his worldwide acclaim and his influence in his country was his ideology. He wanted a South Africa with unity and equality, where everyone is given equal opportunities regardless of race. Speaking at the Rivonia trial, the trial in which he was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Apartheid government, “this [was] an ideal for which [he] [was] prepared to die.”

In 2003, a small but majestic bridge was constructed. It served to link two main business areas—of Braamfontein and Newtown—as well as to rejuvenate, and to a certain level, modernize the inner city. According to Southafrica.net, this Johannesburg landmark symbolically links the old and new as it ushers traffic into the heart of rejuvenated downtown Johannesburg. The vast quantities of construction materials that went into its construction portray what a feat of engineering it is. It took 4 000 cubic meters of concrete, 1 000 tons of structural steel and 500 tons of construction steel to realize the seemingly weightless pinnacle that gleams up in the Johannesburg night sky.

The bridge does not merely honor this iconic man, Mandela, it also represents his belief; a belief he has successfully instilled into the heart and minds of South Africans; a belief in unity at all cost and equality for all. The bridge was built as a symbol of linkage and unity as

it links two previously separated parts of 'town.' It reminds those South Africans commuting these two areas about the shames of the Apartheid past and about the hope for a bright future.

Architecture also reflects economic ideologies quite strongly. A distinguishing factor between cities and the countryside for instance, is the structures constructed in those spaces. Cities characterized by many buildings, mostly sophisticated, communicate an idea of power, control and opportunity, whereas the countryside gives off an impression of a vulnerable and outdated environment. The analysis of the everyday landscape and information about the appearance and control of space can reveal economic ideologies in a society. Guidelines on control of urban space in communist societies are completely different from those in capitalist societies. In communist countries for instance, the buildings tend to be very standardized, such as in Bucharest, Romania, where the skyline is dominated by standardized apartment blocks. This promotes the ideology of sharing of wealth, a sense of equality among the citizens.

In capitalist societies, the ideology comes through as well. New York City for example, characterized by skyscrapers gives off an idea of concentration of power. Midtown Manhattan, the largest central business district in the world, is home to such notable buildings as the Empire State Building. Wall Street is a symbol of power in the New York financial district. According to Jackie Craven in her article 'Walking Down Wall Street,' early in its history, Wall Street became a symbol of commerce and capitalism in the New World and the young United States. Today, Wall Street continues to represent wealth, prosperity, and, to some, greed.

Communist countries may choose to imitate the urban forms of other similar countries, and the same for capitalist countries. The spread of ideologies thus is also characterized through

imitation of structures. However while some architectural works may attest to differences in ideologies, some are not so easy to distinguish.

With globalization and preference of functionality over form, overlaps in architecture are bound to occur, thereby affecting the accuracy of architecture as a portrayal of ideology.

Although it is important to acknowledge how theories and ideologies affect architecture, it is also important to note that cultural, social and historical influences may sometimes have a stronger impact. Architecture obviously plays a role in conveying ideas across to people as can be seen in the case of the Nelson Mandela Bridge. However, it is not a crucial ingredient needed for the success of ideologies. In fact, more often than not, it comes in play as a supplement to other actions or inactions. In other words, it is a luxury very few can afford as a method of enforcing ideologies, and its implementation has definitely declined over time.