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ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS (autumn)

Democracy is good: it is one way of life which is promoted by a huge variety of peoples: I have not heard any derogatory talk on the subject, ever. Even our pre 1994 government pretended to it. But now we're doing it.

I went to see the Constitutional Court a few weeks ago. The development is the result of an architectural competition won by a Durban partnership about 5 years ago. It is the core of the administration of our Constitution. I have seen some articles in magazines and the model presented by the winners, but I had not understood the ethos of it, until I was there.

It is an old site, easily accessed from the city of Johannesburg, and from the north of Johannesburg, as well as off the M1 if you arrive from the south. It occupies a whole block in Braamfontein, only one block from the civic centre and close to Wits University.

I emphasise these points because the essence of accessible environments is that the wayfinding should be easy.

It was not however easy to find the front door. One of the reasons is there are, and always will be, several front doors. I'd like to see a layer in front of these which would be the main entrance. (The whole development is not yet complete, so perhaps this will be resolved.)

I took a guided tour; There are 5 main enclaves composing the whole, the Constitutional Court being one of them. The other 4 are all historically important, and symbolize the journey to democracy.

The main part of what used to be the Johannesburg Prison is where the Constitutional Court has been built. The older buildings are used as a museum and physically it is connected by an outdoor staircase, the African Steps, narrow at the top where the courthouse is, and wide at the bottom. There is a meandering ramp cut into this symbolizing the meandering paths across hillsides. There are several resting places (landings) on the way. However, this does come to a finish 3 steps below the level of the main entrance to the Court. There are doors into the Court building leading on to a stunning internal staircase, slate clad, and with mosaic highlights on the nosings. This is appropriate for a wide range of people, but it is unfortunate that there is no handrail, inside or outside. It was probably an aesthetic decision, but not acceptable in this building. The architects are clever enough to have resolved this, and the clients to have insisted. These could be artworks in themselves adding to the art collection. I have written about this part of the building first because it is one of the key elements in the whole fabric of this development. However, it is clear that the main piece in this is the courtroom itself. It is in the usual shape of an auditorium, with the 9 seats of the appointed judges at the lowest level in a quadrant shape, and the public gallery, and legal teams, arranged amphitheatre like looking on to this. The whole is stepped to gain access. It is patent that any wheelchair user of the public would have to use the uppermost tier, and that a member of the legal team who is disabled would have difficulty in achieving the assigned place in this formal arrangement if that person were visually or mobility impaired.

The oldest area of this complex is used as a museum and exhibition space. It is not restored, but maintained. As was the way, there are many areas where steps formed part of the horizontal circulation. These have been retained and mildsteel chequer plate has been added in a clear way as an add-on to facilitate seamless access.(see picture) I think it has been sensitively done, without destroying the heritage aspect of this environment; again the handrails have not been installed, and this excludes so many.

It is important, in our society especially, that this building complex acknowledge the rights of all members of it by being accessible to all. This 'work of consequence' "an industry favourite" should have had universal design principles as a key part of the brief.

"Those who would sacrifice liberty for safety, deserve neither" Benjamin Franklin.

“The future does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic towards common problems and their fellow man alike, timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects. Rather it belongs to those who can blend reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideals and great enterprises of....American...society.” Robert Kennedy

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