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Nabeel Essa is a practicing architect with a background in Fine Arts. He graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture with distinction from the University of the Witwatersrand. Thereafter he received a master's degree in Landscape Urbanism from the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. He participates as guest critic and examiner at numerous South African architectural schools. In 2002, he founded the practice OFFICE 24/7 ARCHITECTURE which focuses on unique curatorial and design methodologies in combining spatial understanding with innovative ways of re- interpreting cultural space. The practice works with narrative as a framework for projects that aim to broaden imagination and to stimulate engagement. The practice critically and spatially re- imagines museums, exhibitions and architectural projects. Through an embodied experience of difference and otherness, and from the margin as vantage, Nabeel curates and designs to engage, empower, and in the making – to transform.

Building as artefact: from prison to museum

When open-air, site specific museums focus on buildings, spaces and place as the artefacts around which content and narrative development respond, a tension between past and present emerges. These in-situ artefacts are displaced through the passage of time and through the development process of adaptive reuse. My interest is to revisit the heritage and spatial decisions made during the Constitution Hill project development in Johannesburg and to consider ways of working with such toxic sites that allow buildings as artefacts a presence that is about un-making boundaries and unbinding history.

In 1996 the process commenced for the development of Constitution Hill from a disused prison complex to the site of the Constitutional Court and a museum. Buildings were demolished, commemorated and moved. New buildings were erected under an urban masterplan. The site was transformed in both its physical materiality and the way it performs in and engages the city. If we assume the project intention was to transform the site as an act of restitution for the atrocities enacted on-site, their ramifications and the systems that the site represented, then how effective were the heritage, architectural, curatorial and programming decisions made in the formation of the precinct?

Does the interpretive context allowed through the mechanics of museums offer the prison structures within the Constitution Hill precinct the dual role of memory and transformation? The criteria around the notion and status of heritage practice in this context needs interrogation, in terms of how these artefacts are able to unlock regeneration. My intention is to consider ways of intervening on toxic historic sites; ways to interpret, interrupt and transform such sites of tangible, spatial, colonial and apartheid evidence.

