

Samanta Bartocci
**Drawings and projects, Jo Noero and architectural practice
 in South Africa**

Abstract

Works constructed, designed, drawn by hand and redesigned after they have been built, have given life to a pathway, but above all, a succession of diversities, precisely because architecture is not a specialist domain but a meeting-point between different forms of human creativity. Noeroarchitects' (South Africa) professional work and the visions of a progressive repertory of architectural drawings by Jo Noero indicate the role of drawing as an instrument for portraying not just facts but also desires. Drawing is for Noero common writing, it is the sense of knowing by doing, which protects him from the abstractness of the diagrams and stylistic figures of his profession as an architect; drawing has nurtured the complexity of his vision and the corresponding relations between architecture and the strength of the purpose for which it is built.

Keywords

Noeroarchitects — Freehand drawing — Progressive archive — Architectural practice — South Africa

In the background

«How can an idea survive interpretation and become a powerful statement in a completely different context?» (Noero 2012)

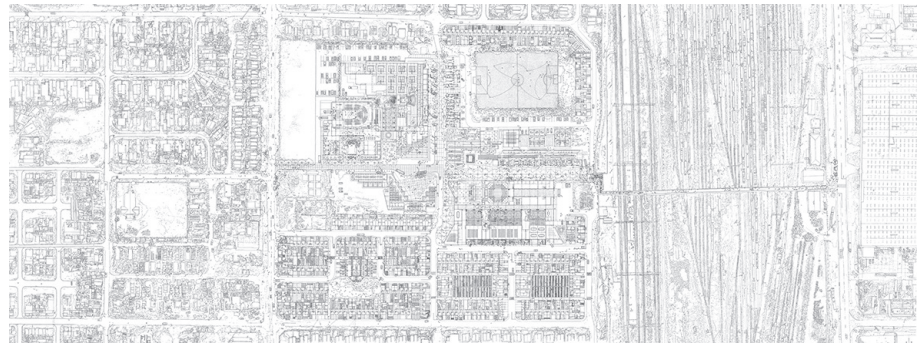
Knowledge strategy requires a place of provocation, and with drawing this process starts up synchronicity.

Architectural drawing expresses a linguistic act, research, the knowledge of a complex set of ideas; the design process drives these actions which take place simultaneously; the idea and drawing encourage each other with queries that develop and in turn unlock new ideas. The mechanism of comparison, checking and communication between the ideas and their chance of being turned into architectural spaces first finds its place in the drawing, in that most personal, deep essence which attracts the attention of the person who has to create the architecture.

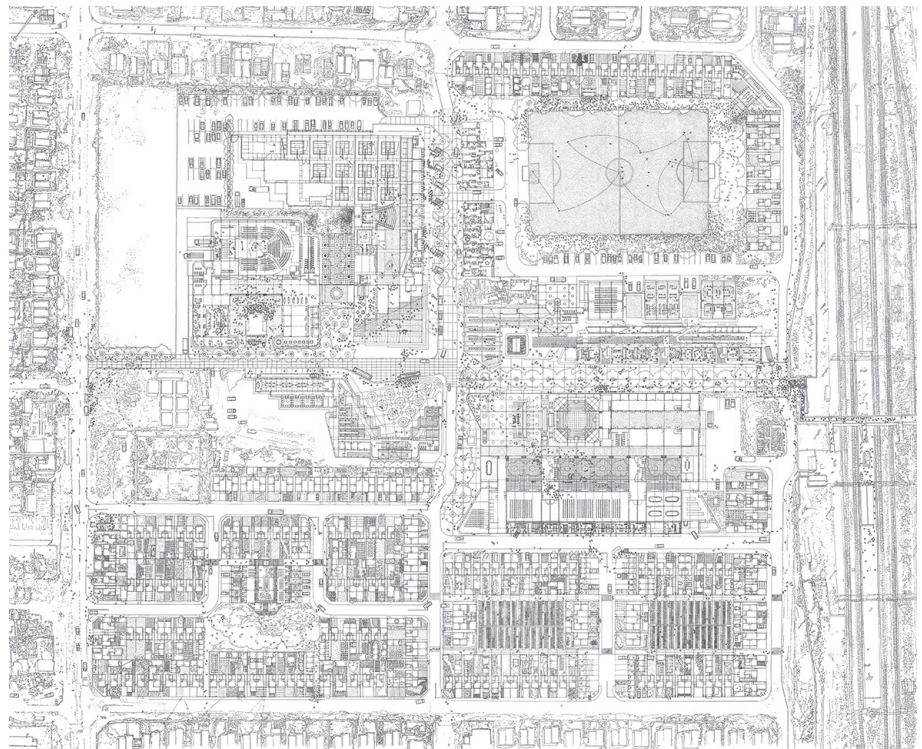
This is a self-critical dimension, where the designer taps into that continuous checking that makes the project a sort of *self-reflection*¹. «An exercise, almost as in Loyola, that will grow and develop through lucid experimentation with one's efforts, one's difficulty in maturing and reconfiguring things» (Moschini 2002). As Alain Berthoz, the engineer, psychologist and neurophysiologist, observed in 1997, «perception without design does not exist». According to Berthoz (1997) «in fact, it is indeed poor reflection on the nature of portrayal that leads the architecture of our time to forget, [...] that buildings are not just a static combination of forms, but are also inspired by and extracted from movement; they are, that is, the result of the ability to not simply describe and portray reality as it presents itself, but to also *suggest hypotheses on the possible and predict the future*» (Tagliagambe 2014).

Fig. 1

Red Location Cultural Precinct
Noeroarchitects, Venice Biennial
2012; Common Ground/Different
Worlds. Noeroarchitects, Jo
Noero Principal with The Keis-
kamma Trust, Hamburg, Eastern
Cape, South Africa Collabora-
tors-Aaron Factor, David Long.
Hand drawing Jo Noero, "Trans-
formation of Red Location",
2012, ink on paper digital post
production printed on canvas,
9.4mx3.5m. © Noeroarchitects
Archives, courtesy of Jo Noero.

**Fig. 2**

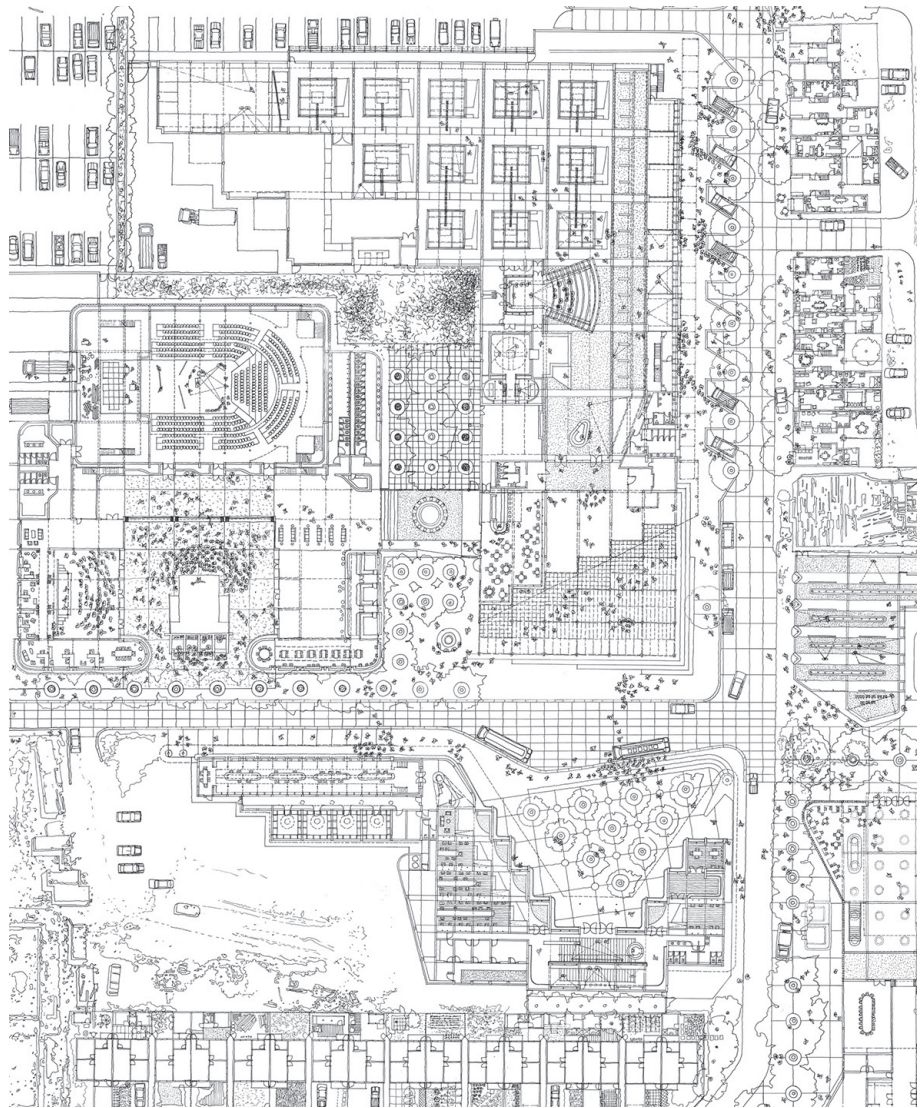
Detail; "Transformation of Red
Location". © Noeroarchitects Ar-
chives, courtesy of Jo Noero.



The place and the thread

Jo Noero² is one of the protagonists of contemporary African and South African architecture. For Noero «Architecture is a social art otherwise known as a practical art – as such architects do not possess the freedom of the fine artist, poet or sculptor to create works. Architecture is made to satisfy purpose – the social purpose for which architecture is made carries within it an ethical dimension – see Colin St John Wilson. Also refer to the five differences between architecture and the other arts described by Roger Scruton» (Noero 2018).

The cultural situation in South Africa has been changing continuously, especially over the last decades, and the course of action Noero has chosen has been to grant the highest degree of objectivity and clarity to the project location and construction practice. A sort of search for balance, almost salvific, in actions. For Jo Noero the Eighties were years of experimenting during *apartheid*; his repertory of built architecture explored, particularly with some residential building projects, the potential of the self-constructed buildings erected by township inhabitants. This was the start of a long season of reflection and action in which the art of practice, economy of materials and the meanings of construction shifted his interest onto direct experience of the ordinary and the everyday. His idea of transforming the everyday object into a subject from which to learn was a kind of revolution in the concept of architecture. Challenging the mere conservation of

**Fig. 3**

Detail: at top Museum of Struggle, in lower margin the Archive and Library in "Transformation of Red Location". © Noeroarchitects Archives, courtesy of Jo Noero.

the colonial architectural style in South Africa was for Jo Noero the rediscovery of what might be called a line of coherence between function and expression.

A rich progressive repertory of projects hand-drawn by Jo Noero has plotted out the route of architectural research in the South African context. Free-hand drawing, which was the area of knowledge of the 'real' for him, was the means wherein he accommodated the everyday.

His architectural drawings were three-dimensional thoughts, elementary nuclei, the reference points of his own work and of the formal and symbolic origins up against the controversial history of South Africa.

Meditating, examining the deep reasons upon which the initial idea of a project is based, led to the concepts of Culture, History and Public Space – discussed elsewhere or simply revisited – being central to the vision of the everyday in *post-apartheid* South Africa.

Noero's Studio in Cape Town comprises a group of young people with whom he works in close contact. The initial drawing for each project is not a sketch for Noero but a very accurate drawing by hand (Chipperfield 2020), highly detailed and produced from a sequence of marks stratified on twenty or thirty layers of transparent shiny sheets; his drawing dominates the tools and is clearly the fruit of a rare ability. It is steered by his idea and is an indispensable tool to communicate and give life to the space for



Fig. 4
 “Keiskamma After Guernica”;
 Venice Biennial 2012: Com-
 mon ground/ Different worlds;
 the Keiskamma Women’s Pro-
 ject; 7.8×3.5m Tapestry, mixed
 media, various hand-stitched
 textiles. © Noeroarchitects Ar-
 chives, courtesy of Jo Noero.

sharing the idea. Drawing is, for him, a way to develop assessments and actions, since architectural design practice intentionally involves customs originating from different places and cultures, but also and especially, because – due to the solidity of the data it passes through and the confidence with which it transfers them – the plan becomes more and more an unambiguous pathway.

I find these worlds extraordinarily exciting in which to work and full of promise – much of my work has been directed towards finding ways to unlock these potentials.

The work I do is shaped by this sense of the origin of architecture. The work we do is shaped by two main ideas - the first being an engagement with the everyday and secondly a respect and commitment to the context both physical and social within which the work is located.

The following ideas provide a guideline to describe how we use the idea of the everyday in our work - some of which come from Deborah Berke and some from Noeroarchitects.

1. An architecture of the everyday may be crude.
2. An architecture of the everyday may be banal or common.
3. An architecture of the everyday may be quite ordinary.
4. An architecture of the everyday acknowledges everyday life.
5. An architecture of the everyday responds to both program and is functional.
6. An architecture of the everyday is capable of adjustment and adaptation over time.
7. An architecture of the everyday is capable of adaptation and adjustment over time.
8. An architecture of the everyday is buildable.
9. An architecture of the everyday is shaped by a careful consideration of those ordinary activities that form part of the domestic rituals and activities of people³.

In his drawings the role of the architect is discovered once more.

The layering of signs makes it possible to carry out a critical gaze to a vision of the everyday, towards a need to transcend the roots, towards a remarkable manifestation of each man and woman.

Every drawing tells a story.

To me the plan is similar to a written text in as much as it narrates the architect’s understanding of the program embedded in the organization of space in the plan. Taken further the plan represents the architect’s view of the world and his/her value system. It is in this sense autobiographical and as such gets closest to telling a story about the architect and his/her relationship with the world within which the design is located [...] Drawings probably represent in their abstract form the perfection of architectural ideas⁴.

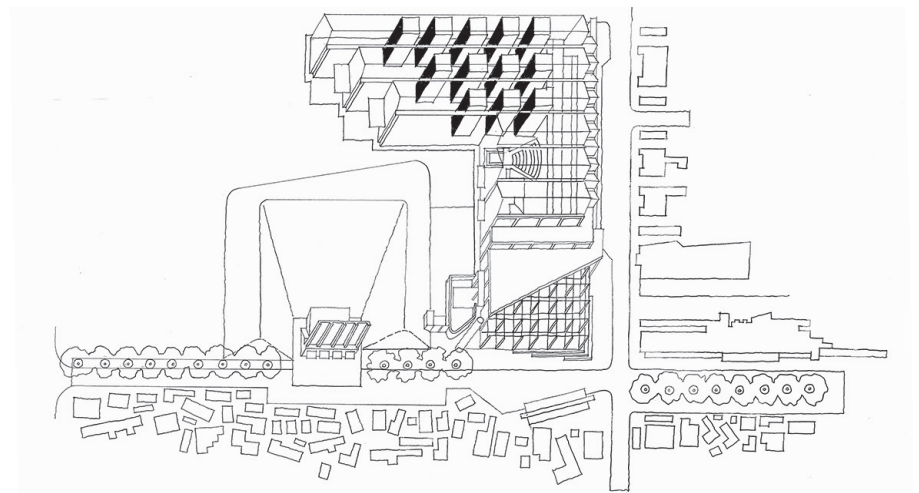
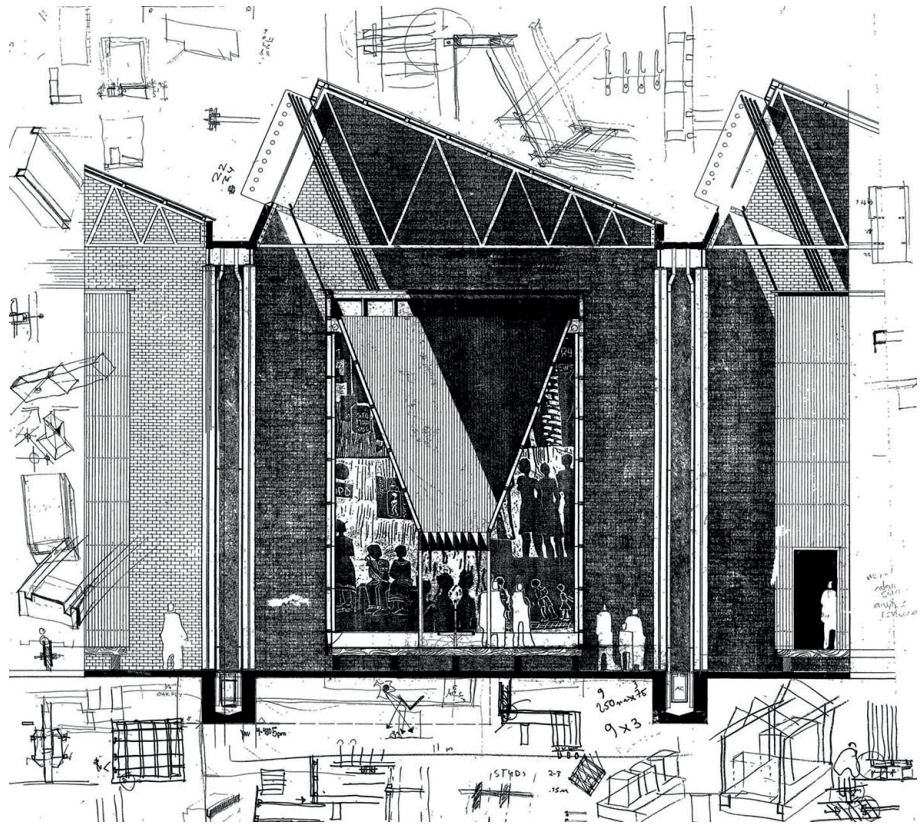
Noero is aware of the *unfaithfulness* of a map and of the biased story it can

Fig. 5

Study drawing of the space of the Memory boxes in the Museum of Struggle, in Red Location Cultural Precinct. © Noeroarchitects Archives, courtesy of Jo Noero.

Fig. 6

Axonomic study of the space of the Museum of Struggle, in Red Location Cultural Precinct. © Noeroarchitects Archives, courtesy of Jo Noero.



bring back to life; but the work *Transformation of Red Location*, which he displayed at the 13th Venice Architecture Biennial in 2012, logically explains through the architectural project the need to work bearing in mind the two meanings of time, coined by A. Rossi as “*chronological and atmospheric*”. We do not know the world by portraying it but, rather, we can design it considering in the background the double nature of time that presides over every construction; architecture that fights time and architecture as a form of survival. Therefore, the indivisible variety of materials of a map turn into operative tools on the common ground between architecture and the everyday.

Jo Noero displays a ‘combined’ work that has a double nature, two wall-hangings measuring 9.4 m x 3 m, side by side. The first was created by hand by a cooperative of 50 women in Hamburg, Eastern Cape. With its title *Keiskamma After Guernica* and explicit figurative and dimensional references, it recalls Picasso’s painting. The theme represented is of course



Fig. 7

Red Location Cultural Precinct and New Brighton; in the background the Museum of Struggle, on right the Art Gallery and at bottom the Archive and Library. © Noeroarchitects Archives, courtesy of Jo Noero.

a scenario of death and suffering, but it alludes mainly to the devastating effect HIV has had on the population, especially women, of South Africa. The second equal-sized wall-hanging is a large map on the scale 1:100 of the *Red Location Cultural Precinct* project – the fruit of a design process underway for more than 20 years. Completely hand-drawn by Noero, this is a layering of the existing components, built and foreseen for the Red Location in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth⁶.

It questions the spatial relations between the elements, between the public spaces, the Museum of Struggle, the art gallery, the archive, library and living space; «a sort of informative thread, it is the departure point for multiple series of different readings, interpretations and manipulation» (Tagliagambe 2005); it traces the movements of the inhabitants on any one day, and the spatialisation they produce over time.

The map is purposely over-written, re-written, stratified and rewoven throughout the public and living places; it is sketched out by the urban traffic, by actions in the playground and shopping places. The drawing portrays the complexity and correlation between the parts – *shack dwellers*, houses, social housing, museums, libraries, archives, art galleries, theatres, spaces for shows, for meetings and conferences, football pitches and a school of arts and crafts.

For Noero the place of drawing is not the last interlocutory act for the project but, rather, conserves within it the invention.

His need to redesign projects from scratch, even if partly finished, created a meditative space that in the case of *Transformation of Red Location* continued for six months' daily work.

The practice of redesigning a posteriori is a theoretical commitment to his personal thoughts on architecture seeking codes, principles of form and structure. In this work Noero makes clear the role of architect as an agent of change, the work inviting a gazing strategy, «a sort of sixth sense that is able to foresee what is about to happen in the reality of the surrounding space» (Berthoz 1997). It involves a change of perspective that replaces the act of representation with an action, or better, an interaction at the border between ourselves and the world.

Notes

¹ To study further see Moschini F. (2002) – *Disegni di architettura italiana dal dopoguerra ad oggi dalla collezione Francesco Moschini AAM Architettura arte moderna*. Edizioni Centro Di, Florence.

² Jo Noero founded Noeroarchitects in Johannesburg in 1984. Noero has received local and international awards, including the Lubetkin Award of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2006, the Ralph Erskine Prize from the Nordic Association of Architects in 1993 and the Gold Medal for Architecture from the South African Institute of Architects in 2010. Noero's works have been displayed at the MoMA in New York, the Venice Biennial, San Paolo Biennial, Singapore Biennial, Cape Town National Gallery of Art and the MAXXI in Rome.

³ This position which becomes clear in the statements given was rewritten and reformulated by Jo Noero some years later in his first critical text and can be found in full in the section “Generating housing, Architecture of the everyday”, of the book by S. Bartocci, M. Faiferri (2021) – *Drawing and Building. Noeroarchitects*. List Lab, Barcelona.

⁴ A fragment of conversation that took place with Jo Noero about his projects of recent years in the Noeroarchitects office, Cape Town, South Africa (2018).

⁵ To study further see S. Bartocci (2018) – *Red Location Cultural Precinct, Noeroarchitects*. List Lab, Barcelona.

⁶ The Red Location Cultural Precinct project was the fruit of a design process begun in 1998 with the architecture competition to develop this Precinct. In the first phase the Museum of Struggle was built, involving Noero Wolff Architects (Jo Noero [Principal] and Heinrich Wolff) in association with John Blair; in the following phases, developed and followed by Noeroarchitects, the art gallery, the archive and library were created. Financial and social problems brought the works to a halt on various occasions, putting to the test those parts of the buildings already constructed (the second construction phase ended in 2011). However, a third construction phase was foreseen which Noero drew in this work *Transformation of Red Location* of 2012.

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Samanta Bartocci (Matelica, 1974), architect, graduated with honours from the Faculty of Architecture of Ascoli Piceno, UNICAM. She has been teaching and researching since 2004 at Alghero, Department of Architecture Design and Urban Planning, University of Sassari. He holds a PhD in “*Conoscenza e progetto delle forme dell'insediamento*” - cycle XVII with a thesis on “*l'Anatomia del condominio borghese: Milano, Roma, Napoli, l'architettura della residenza multipiano*” at the Faculty of Architecture of Ascoli Piceno, obtaining the title in 2005. He is currently a research fellow at the Department of Architecture Design and Urban Planning of the University of Sassari. His recent publications include: *Red Location Cultural Precinct; Noeroarchitects*; *Noeroarchitects*. vol. 03 (LISTLab 2018); Faiferri M., Fabrizio P. ILS_Innovative Learning Space. (LISTLab 2020); and with Faiferri M., Cabras L., Pusceddu F., “Communicating scientific knowledge”. In: O., Carpenzano, A., Capanna, A.I., Del Monaco, F., Menegatti, T., Monestiroli, D., Nencini (eds.), *Creativity and reality - The art of building future cities*, (Edizioni Nuova Cultura 2020).