

THE MEMORY BOX: A CAPITAL ENDEAVOUR

ARCHITECTS: **MATHEWS AND ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS CC**

BY: **NICHOLAS J CLARKE**



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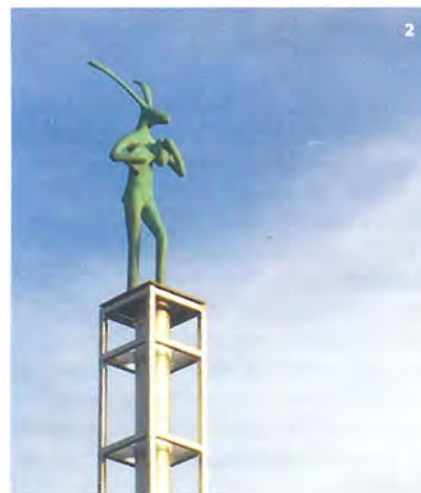
THE A RE YENG

All four of the largest cities in South Africa have built Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems over the last decade. As the stations of these new transport systems are the most visible manifestation of political will (and consequent public spending) towards civic transformation, it is not surprising that South African BRT stations completed to date are, to say the least, architecturally expressive. In infrastructure design, engineering predominates, leaving little space for aesthetic expression besides applied decoration or excessive structural gymnastics. This has led to rather unfortunate a-contextual BRT stations in other cities. The *A Re Yeng* Tshwane Rapid Transit (TRT) system is a welcome exception.

Tshwane was the last of the four largest South African cities to have commenced with operations of a BRT. The stations in the inception phase of the TRT are the result of a design competition launched by the implementation agent, SANRAL.

The call for designs was open to 18 preselected practices; each requested to submit a minimum of two and a maximum of four concept designs, one per route section. It was clear from the brief that the client required a contextual approach; the character of each of the four route sections was well described in the brief.

The submitted designs were evaluated by an architectural panel, independently reviewed by the City of Tshwane and



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1. The Nana Sita Street TRT Station (L Purnell)
2. Art Installation by Guy du Toit (P Mathews)



finally vetted by SANRAL for buildability. Two designs were selected for construction: Mathews and Associates' 'Memory Box' and Mashabane Rose's 'Retro Tram'.

MEMORY BOX

The Memory Box design, prepared for the historic inner-city environment, sought to contain the visual impact of the stations without reverting to copyist strategies. The prototype was designed as an aesthetically neutral glazed volume that mirrors its context. To reduce visual impact, the built stations are lower in height than others along the TRT lines. The fully glazed geometricised façades

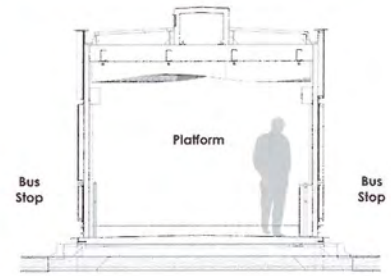
are further scaled down through horizontal steel beams, filled in with glazed panels. Some of these panels project beyond the skin, and are filled with translucent glass to further reduce the visual scale of the whole.

The intention of the architect was clearly to create a mirror to the architectural heritage of the city, instead of expressing a new 'transport' identity. We should be thankful for this. The stations are located in predefined positions, in front of some of the most historical and architecturally significant places in the city: the Old Synagogue (Beardwood & Ibler, 1898, site of the Rivonia Trial, Freedom Trail and Steve Biko in-

quest), between the Raadsaal (Wierda in the ZAR DPW, 1888) and Standard Bank (Stucke & Harrison, 1931) just off Church Square, and in front of the Didacta Building (Smit & Viljoen, 1967).

Yet it was necessary to mark the locations of the stations; the public needs to be able to find them, after all!

Steles punctuate the entrances of each station site. These are topped by art installations for which invited artists – including Diane Victor, Banele Khoza, Norman Catherine and Guy du Toit – were commissioned. This civic arts programme, uninitiated by the Memory Box design, has been continued to the other TRT stations.



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The stations require hardwearing surfaces, but the architect saw the opportunity offered by the ceiling plane. Plywood panels hang in a continuing flowing wave, softening the interior and bringing some calm to the chaotic sensory environment of the inner city.

Larger stations, which consist of two 'boxes' in tandem, required an open-air fire exit link. The architects seized this opportunity to create a welcome waiting courtyard, which includes shade trees. The stations are ventilated through open plinths and the roof, which has a ventilation clerestory, but it remains to be seen how salubrious the insides of these boxes will remain under the harsh Highveld sun.

The Memory Box stations are a welcome civic-minded contribution to the urban environment of the inner city of Tshwane. The design is sophisticated in its subtlety, seeking architectural expression in subtle detailing rather than large structural gestures. It speaks to what is possible when the designer seeks complexity in the strictures of a limiting programme. It also shows the value of

- 3. Interior and courtyard (P Mathews)
- 4. A Memory Box under construction (L Purnell)
- 5. Reflections in the façade (P Mathews)
- 6. Typical section (Mathews and Associates)
- 7. A Memory Box station in operation (P Mathews)
- 8. Art installation on stele by Diane Victor (P Mathews)



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a client who can set a well-considered brief and has an eye for sophistication.

Nicholas Clarke is a Heritage Studies Associate at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, and at the Delft University of Technology.

9. The Nana Sita Street Memory Box at TRT Station – entrance (L Purnell)

10. Reflections in the façade of the Memory Box (P Mathews)

PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Architects: Mathews & Associates Architects cc

Client: City of Tshwane

Implementation agent: South African National Roads Agency (Soc) LTD

Principal agent: Royal Haskoning DHV

Quantity surveyor: Equate

Contractors: Group Five

Electrical, mechanical and structural engineers: Royal Haskoning DHV

Façade engineer: THS & Associates