

Stress and Wellness in the Architecture and Cities of Soweto, Johannesburg, and New York City

Hilary Sample

Columbia University

Jay Siebenmorgen

Columbia University

This past spring eight graduate students traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa, as part of a new initiative between GSAPP and NBBJ. Their joint mission was to gain a new understanding of stress and wellness at the intersection of urban public health, architecture, and cities. On-site research and exploration of Johannesburg, at a time when architectural education is becoming more immersive, extends work from the studio to the site and back again.

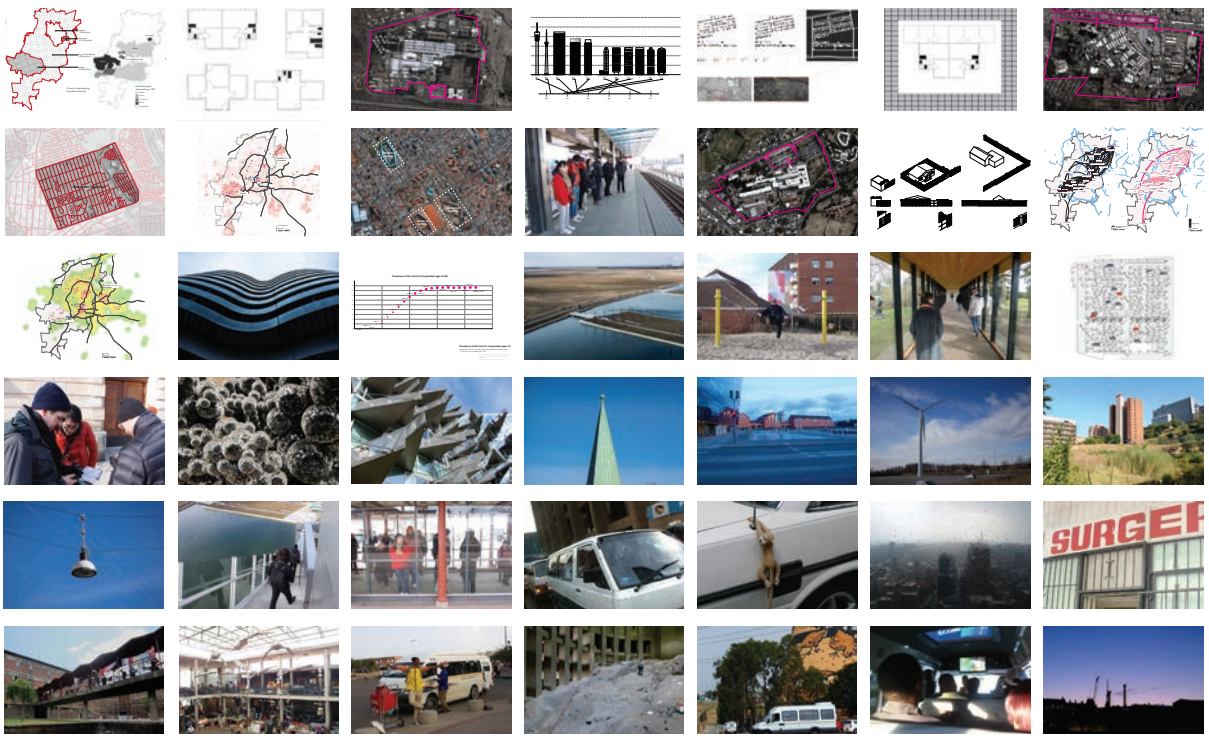
Johannesburg served as a uniquely stressed environment to study, presenting a possibility for the greatest invention towards wellness. The epidemiological term “social equivalency” became an important concept for our observations of built form, constructed since the end of Apartheid. We focused on three particular areas: Hillbrow in Central Johannesburg, the Bara area within Soweto, and Alexandra.

Prior to the trip, students and faculty alike struggled to gain access to data we found in maps and statistics. But remote access to information is limiting, with a majority of key documents found only in archives and libraries that are yet to be placed online. Therefore the students learned about the city, in part, through close readings of Google Maps, select bibliographies, and data collected by international agencies. Throughout the semester, this research was augmented by faculty organized lectures which featured topics such as apartheid era activism, the social effects of the AID/HIV pandemic, and public health research strategies. Similarly, a symposium entitled ‘The Intersection between Urban Health and Architecture’ was organized that brought together architects, urban planners, city officials, and public health experts to discuss architecture and the city’s role in stress and wellness. Among other things, this process raised the need to rethink the relationship of the distance separating site and studio.

If social equivalency is understood as groups that share similar conditions, typically a measure of one’s health, then it was possible for the studio to uncover situations of social distance. To further this typological study we asked students to explore the relationship to stress and urban form in New York and Copenhagen in comparison to Johannesburg. The layering of public health crises in Johannesburg from the legacy of Apartheid, AIDS/HIV pandemic, and poverty, coupled with lack of infrastructure, decaying buildings, and increased immigrant populations, makes the city ideal for observation and in-depth fieldwork. Above all, health, as a subject is revealed to be extraordinarily local today.

This condition requires intensively local architectural types to respond through inventive programs. By learning about the multifaceted problems of urban stress, the studio found glimmers of optimism through a variety of wellness-related responses—from commingling housing and building repair guilds, to shelter and sanctuary from gender-based violence, a taxi rank with an assembly hall, and a new city center that fosters education and public space. By interfacing on the ground, the studio as a collective was able to experience social equivalencies, even if their living and housing contexts were radically different.

The studio was led by Hilary Sample, Associate Professor, GSAPP Columbia University, and Jay Siebenmorgen, Adjunct Assistant Professor, GSAPP Columbia University.



STRESS AND WELLNESS

IN THE ARCHITECTURE AND CITIES OF SOWETO, JOHANNESBURG, AND NEW YORK CITY

Redefining the relationship between site and studio by studying public health in three cities.

This past spring eight graduate students traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa, as part of a new initiative between the school and an international design firm. Their point mission was to gain a new understanding of stress and wellness at the intersection of urban public health, architecture, and cities. This on-site research and exploration of Johannesburg, at a time when architectural education is becoming more immersive, extends work from the studio to the site and back again. Johannesburg served as a unique and uniquely stressed environment to study, presenting a possibility for the greatest invention towards wellness. The epidemiological term "social equitability" became an important concept for our observations of built form, constructed since the end of Apartheid. We focused on three particular areas: Hillbrow in Central Johannesburg, the Bara area within Soweto, and Alexandra.

Prior to the trip, students and faculty alike struggled to gain access to data we found in maps and statistics. But remote access to information is limiting, with a majority of key documents found only in archives and libraries that are yet to be placed online. Therefore the students learned about the city, in part, through close readings of Google Maps, select bibliographies, and data collected by international agencies. Throughout the semester, this research was augmented by locally organized lectures which featured topics such as apartheid era activism, the social effects of the AIDS/HIV pandemic, and contemporary public health research strategies. Similarly, a symposium entitled

The Intersection between Urban Health and Architecture was organized that brought together architects, urban planners, city officials, and public health experts to discuss architecture and the city's role in stress and wellness. Among other things, this process raised the need to rethink the relationship of the distance separating site and studio. If social equitability is understood as groups that share similar conditions, typically a measure of one's health, then it was possible for the studio to uncover situations of social distance. To further this typological study we asked students to explore the relationship to stress and urban form in New York and Copenhagen in comparison to Johannesburg. The layering of public health crises in Johannesburg from the legacy of Apartheid, AIDS/HIV pandemic, and poverty, coupled with lack of infrastructure, decaying buildings, and an increase in the immigrant population, makes the city ideal for observation and in-depth fieldwork. Above all, health, as a subject is revealed to be extraordinary local today.

This condition requires intensively local architectural types to respond to needs through inventive programs. By learning about the multifaceted problems of urban stress, the studio found glimmers of optimism through a variety of wellness-related responses—from commingling housing and building repair guilds, to shelter and sanctuary from gender-based violence, a taxi rank with an assembly hall, and a new city center that fosters education and public space. By interfacing on the ground, the studio as a collective, was able to experience social equitabilities, even if their living and housing contexts were radically different.

