2017 African Critical Inquiry Workshop: Secret Affinities

The African Critical Inquiry Programme (ACIP) is pleased to announce that the 2017 ACIP workshop will be Secret Affinities: A workshop in critical reading and an interrogation of the city in Africa via Walter Benjamin’s “Passagen-Werk.” The project was proposed and will be organized by colleagues at the University of the Witwatersrand, Noëleen Murray (Director, Wits City Institute and Andrew W. Mellon Research Chair in Critical Architecture and Urbanism) and Brett Pyper (Head of the Wits School of Arts). Working groups formed in the initial Secret Affinities workshop will develop collaborative projects over the following year, presenting their outcomes in seminars and public forums in 2018. Activities will take place in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Secret Affinities

Das Passagen-Werk, Walter Benjamin’s unfinished refection on modernity and history, is the starting point for a two-day workshop in which sections of Benjamin’s text (known in English as The Arcades Project) will be discussed with the aim of facilitating cross-disciplinary discussion in relation to heritage, architecture and public history practices associated with cities and the African present. As with Benjamin’s positioning in Paris, his ‘capital of the nineteenth Century’, we work from our vantage point in Johannesburg, city of an African (but also hybrid) modernity, arguably the ‘African capital of the twenty-first century.’ We follow Benjamin’s endeavour in Arcades to construct ‘a world of secret affinities’ in which his assemblage of notes, reflections and citations on a host of topics, could begin to inform each other in unpredictable ways. The very site of the workshop illustrates the layered urban histories, experiences, transformations and architectural imaginations that the workshop will seek to examine.
through particular sites. It will take place at what is now known as Satyagraha House, built as a residence in 1907 by German-born Lithuanian architect Hermann Kallenbach with a rondavel-inspired design. Mohandas Gandhi lived there with his friend Kallenbach and others for two years. Today the buildings have been renovated as a heritage site, museum about Gandhi’s time in South Africa, and guest house. It is a place steeped in history that we cannot recover outside of imaginary recreation involving rhetorics of display and heritage curation; a place that cannot now be divorced from re-invention or politics, but that nevertheless has been re-invented in austere opulence by a French tourism company working with an historian, curator and heritage architect.

The Secret Affinities workshop will form small discussion and working groups made up of established scholars, artists, architects and postgraduate students. Groups will define projects located at the intersections of architecture, public history, spatial planning, heritage and urban studies to develop through regular meetings during the following year. Their outcomes will be presented in 2018 and could include exhibitions, performances, public lectures or seminars, publications, digital and on-line platforms, or special editions of journals.

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Founded in 2012, the African Critical Inquiry Programme (ACIP) is a partnership between the Centre for Humanities Research at University of the Western Cape in Cape Town and the Laney Graduate School of Emory University in Atlanta. Supported by donations to the Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz Fund, the ACIP fosters thinking and working across public cultural institutions, across disciplines and fields, and across generations. It seeks to advance inquiry and debate about the roles and practice of public culture, public cultural institutions and public scholarship in shaping identities and society in Africa through an annual ACIP workshop and through the Ivan Karp Doctoral Research Awards, which support African doctoral students in the humanities and humanistic social sciences enrolled at South African universities.

Information about applying to organize the 2018 ACIP workshop and for the 2017 Ivan Karp Doctoral Research Awards will be available in November 2016. The expected deadline for both workshop applications and student applications is 1 May 2017.

For further information, see http://www.gs.emory.edu/about/special/acip.html and https://www.facebook.com/ivan.karp.corinne.kratz.fund.