In 1938, a group of architecture students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, strongly influenced by their youthful lecturer Rex Martienssen, organised the only town planning exhibition ever to be held in South Africa. Under the influence of Martienssen, himself a disciple of Le Corbusier and the teachings of CIAM, the exhibition was steeped in heroic modernist thought. The exhibition presented a series of utopian perspectives on and designs for South African cities. Despite including a number of radical suggestions for urban restructuring, the exhibition accepted the prevailing segregationist model of the time, and even endorsed it with a design for a ‘Model Native Township’ in apparent Corbusian style.

In this talk, the run-up, contextual setting, proceedings and products of the Town Planning exhibition of 1938 are described. The exhibition’s relationship with the South African town planning profession, and its historical significance and impact, are discussed. The talk concludes with a brief engagement on the absence of major planning exhibitions since the 1938-event, despite the post-1994 ‘new era’ of progressive planning thought and practice.

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