

historical *background*

BRAZILIAN INSPIRED PRETORIA REGIONALISM



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ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF PRETORIA

The following section is an introduction to Pretoria Regionalism, the historic context of the Berrals building:

"The First Vernacular, Cape Dutch, was a colonial invention.

South Africa's Second Vernacular began early in the 19th century with Georgian architecture brought to the Eastern Cape from England: a simple, late 18th century domestic style, with classical enrichments adapted by the builder from standard pattern books, which accommodated itself to local variations of materials.

Pretoria Regionalism, the Third Vernacular, reflects a particular response to nature and landscape through the economical use of naturally available and industrially produced materials with an empirical response to climate, all of which tempered by the emergent tenets of the Modern. (Fisher 1998:123)

According to Roger Fisher (1998:124) in the book *Architecture of the Transvaal*, an attempt was made to cultivate pride among the Afrikaner in South Africa in the 1920's and architecture was not a forgotten endeavour as prominent contemporary local architects argued for an "Afrikaans" (African) architecture. Articles written

by Gerhard Moerdyk expounded upon an architecture distinct from Cape Dutch which drew inspiration from, and epitomised the Highveld.

A regional architecture emerged, a mutation of the modern movement, derived from the modifying response to local circumstances in Pretoria, known as Pretoria Regionalism. Works by Hellmut Stauch, Gordon McIntosh and Norman Eaton serves as examples.

Why did an endemic architecture emerge in Pretoria?

"Pretoria was the "traditional" capital of the Afrikaner. Post Anglo-Boer War Pretoria harboured cultured Afrikaners of strong patriotic sentiments who were protagonists in purveying their views. Their ideas were disseminated both by written word and through example. Pretoria housed various Afrikaner cultural institutions and it was also where many of the Afrikaner press and publishing houses were based, for instance 'Die Volkstem' and Van Schaik respectively. Pretoria was also where some of the first financial and retail houses of the Afrikaners were to be established and it was home to many Afrikaner architects, artists and authors." (Fisher 1998:123).



Fig. 3.1. The object of study, The Berrals building

Fig. 3.2. The Ministry of Education and Health, Rio de Janeiro Brazil designed by Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa



When the National Party came into office, they immediately accepted the Pretoria Regionalist Style. It was stylistic a-historic, it didn't carry the identity of a colonial power and created an image of prosperity and wealth. Again Roger Fisher but in conjunction with Schalk le Roux claims in *Die Afrikaanse Woning* (1989:4) that some of the best examples of Modern Style buildings in South Africa are those erected by government departments, for example the Receiver of Revenue Building, the Meat Board Building, the NZASM Building and more recently the Reserve Bank Building, all located in Pretoria.

Eventually, the evolution of circumstances contributed to the demise of the tradition of Pretoria Regionalism. Its associations with the ideology of Apartheid disfavoured its promotion and the choice of Afrikaans as communication medium excluded others unfamiliar with the language. The awarding of commissions through a system of nepotism, and not to those with talent, finally contributed to its demise.

The Brazilian influence

According to Gerneke (1998:203), Brazilian Modernists created the first regional idiom in the international language of Modern architecture by adapting their designs to local skills and local needs. They reinterpreted the aims of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), but steered clear of the sanctimonious dogma of the Modern Movement pioneers.

The Ministry of Education and Health, in Rio de

Janeiro (1938-43), designed by Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer can be seen as an exemplary project, clearly indebted to Le Corbusier but possessing a vitality of its own. It is designed as an isolate volume in space, on giant pilotis, featuring an independent structure and free plan, but the 'brise soleil', free forms, sculpture, enormous murals and roof gardens shows regionalist intent.

The 'Brise Soleil' one of the main elements of the endemic language developed as a response to climatic conditions. It can be traced to the Moorish practice of shading openings with shutters or lattice jalousies and were introduced to the New World by Spanish and Portuguese settlers. Although the term 'brise soleil' was coined by Le Corbusier, Latin American techniques of sun control were widely emulated. Fixed or adjustable louvers and screens of terracotta blocks were soon an integrated part of facades all over the world, often just for the effect rather than climate control.

"...the Brazilian mutation soon gained spirited following in the Transvaal. Spreading in the fifties and sixties from Pretoria to other parts of the country, the Brazilian inspired Regionalism was a crucial contribution to our cultural patrimony. Young Pretoria architects bridged the disparity in taste between orthodox members of the profession and the new generation. The interpretation of the Brazilian Second Wave proved more empathetic than the austere International Style, thus at last making Modern architecture acceptable to patrons and the general public" (Gerneke 1998:197).