

**Thoughts on the role of architects in two African contexts:  
the re-making of urban identity**

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## **Abstract**

How architectural practice is influenced by and influences the contexts of two African countries is explored. This is a comparative study of architectural issues in two contexts where urban identity is being drastically transformed. A framework of advanced theoretical interpretation will improve our understanding of professional practice in terms of limitations and possibilities.

The Sudan and South Africa are looked at because the situations in both countries can provide interesting comparisons: South Africa, debatably, having progressed in a route of recovery, a country in transition as compared to the Sudan that is still on an uncertain path, an instability typical of many African countries.

South Africa's concern with 'crime' is in a sense as serious as Sudan's concern with 'war' and both have their implications on the role of the profession. Preservation and memory are, at least in theory, encouraged in South Africa as part of a healing process. In many cases, the Sudan is wiping out its past and even trying to re-formulate its history.

Architecture and urban design can have the capacity for change and healing. But, can the role of these disciplines be validated, preserved and justified as legitimate professions in both these contexts? This is what the paper sets out to explore.

## **Keywords**

Architecture and urban design, Africa, identity, healing, transformation, professionalism, theoretical interpretation

## **Introduction**

The world is becoming smaller. This has been inevitable. Ideas, articles, lifestyles travel easily from one community to another. This globalization has left us confused and inspired a new awareness of regional histories. Regionalism is an attempt to find some sense of direction as a remedy to the cultural loss. Small communities and regional identities are calling for recognition. This is a positive step forward, as long as naive, superficial interpretations can be avoided.

It is not a question of going back in history, but rather looking forward to the future with a renewed awareness of our rich heritage. Alternative lifestyles will probably be the only guarantee for environmentally sustainable development. They could also be the solution to Africa's darkest problems. We have seen the consequences of people all over the world aspiring to the image of the 'American dream'. We have adopted a culture of excessive consumption, inaccessible aspirations and environmental, social and cultural degradation.

Ahmed ElTaib Zein ElAbdin explains how Ibn Khaldoon identifies the identity and the essence of the spirit in cultural continuity. "Cultural continuity does not mean the succession and continuity of specific ideologies...(which) can change, and governments can change, and philosophies can change, but inherent cultural tendencies will remain. This is because it serves social, cultural and emotional purposes at both the levels of communities and individuals."<sup>1</sup>

Architecture is not just about buildings. Anyone who has worked in the developing world will have faced that reality quite harshly at some point. It plays a much larger role in the life of people in both its form and content. Architecture's inter-disciplinary

role became more evident as professionals were confronted with the complexities of housing and environmentally sensitive development, probably the biggest challenges in the history of the profession. The study of processes of production as well as contextual limitations and opportunities will provide an interesting basis for comparison between the architectural outputs of different contexts.

Assigned to design a large government complex in the most remote mountainous region in Lesotho, a colleague and myself (both volunteer development workers) set out to inspect the site. As soon as we entered Mokhotlong we could see that the whole scheme was a hoax. We had been asked to design a building of enormous magnitude in a town with one broken down road passing through it, several small Chinese stores scattered around it and people wrapped in colorful blankets lazing in the late winter sun: the slow pace of village life.

The site itself was on a sunny slope of a mountain, much vegetated by trees, under whose branches the villagers would apparently meet regularly. We were told it was where the local cattle market is held every now and then. Cattle were actually being kept on the site. The situation is very much the same now, after almost two years.

My colleague and I left two days later with our changed agenda for Mokhotlong. In a positive digression, he was to convince the government ministry he was working for to build a new thatch roof instead of the dilapidated one on the small building of the public library. I set out to Maseru hoping to convince the government to look at the situation in Mokhotlong more realistically and to change their ambitious brief, as well as to make the relevant authorities aware of the dense vegetation on the boundary of the site facing the main road that was being gradually invaded by street

vendors who set up their stalls under its shade.

After designing buildings for the social elite in Khartoum for a number of years, such experiences were a true awakening as to what architecture in developing countries is all about. As well as an awareness of the inadequacies of my education: it had given me no skills to cope with situations that one would most likely be confronted with in African contexts.

Creative brief formulation, achieving consensus between different government officials and departments, becoming aware of the socio-political motives behind government decisions, interacting closely with communities, contextual approaches to design that enable one to make relevant decisions at all stages of a project rather than being confined to the boundaries of the site and the 'given' brief: these were the aspects lacking in our education. We knew many facets of European culture, but we could not operate outside the confines of a small group of professionals and wealthy clients in our own countries.

What is architecture then? What is professionalism? What role do professionals have in the rapid urban transformation that accompanies social, political and economic change? Recovery of identities and social healing are complex processes. Attempts at seeking regional approaches for developments in the built environment are thus researched and portrayed in the following pages. It is based on personal experience in my hometown of Khartoum, Sudan and what is happening around me now in South Africa. It is based on subjecting personal observation to rigorous theoretical analysis and interpretation. It is an attempt to compare and discuss in what ways architecture is contributing (or not contributing) to the general uplifting of people from social and cultural disintegration.

## History, Peoples' Aspirations, Contradictions and the Built Environment

*"...the waste land is so noisy. Having embraced liberty, the people, no longer subjects, start arguing. The arguments wind up and up- they're never supposed to end. Consensus is a mirage for the fainthearted. The arguments are not supposed to end. This is liberty..." (55; Shepherd, 1995)<sup>2</sup>*

The above image describes Shepherd's walled city where everything was fixed and hierarchical and brilliant. When people finally rushed out to the sensual wilderness beyond they found that the material world and life in general could be the subject of perception and not prescription: "...each one's own perception."<sup>3</sup>

The above are some of Shepherd's personal and poetic explorations of the meanings of architecture, inevitably linked to directions in modern culture: culture that should have been a culmination of experiences and development to tradition. Modifications, transformations, dialogues, evaluations, criticism to African culture – to the 'arguing' expressed by Shepherd – nevertheless came to a halt abruptly sometime in history. Theoretical development in much of the world ceased when Europe spread its culture, claiming that it is the only way to enlightenment.

Socially conscious resistance to the forces of globalization is emerging as a strong force. Changes in the architectural profession need to be validated by the adaptation of new social and moral values. The design professions' influence is minimal and its role in shaping values and general views towards the built environment has been limited in its significance. In rural areas, a superficial contact with modernity, has led to the disruption of local identities, while in urban areas developers have had more influence in determining what people perceive to be good architecture. A great rift as come in between the architect's values and the values of communities. This contradiction is evident in our visual landscapes.

The attempts of architects at historical and cultural continuity are sometimes resulting in the mere imitation of shapes, forms and colour from traditional structures that are inserted into a design. Historical and cultural characteristics are reduced to the incorporation of traditional forms like Ndebele patterns on the walls of buildings with no appreciation for the spatial concepts that are evident in traditional villages. Another example is the minarets, mashrabias, arches and domes that have become associated with modern buildings in Muslim countries. Arkoun<sup>4</sup> explains that these elements have become mere signals and have lost their symbolic value in contemporary designed environments. Adding facades of arches or Ndebele patterns to existing or new buildings does not advance the search for alternative, responsive trends in architecture.

### **South Africa and the Sudan**

South Africa has come a long way since atrocities in the name of apartheid were committed, since a group of 'experts' produced the design for the NE51/9 (non-European house design) that has filled up huge expanses of land with sterile ugliness. South Africans are trying to come to terms with their past and with their fellow South Africans. As a foreigner I myself, am also trying to come to terms with South Africa, with the guilt that is inevitable when you live in a country where post-apartheid economic and social segregation has replaced political segregation; in a country where you can still live with no direct contact with the poverty and loss that exists just beyond that hill, 2km down this dirt road, or maybe just a few minutes walk to the town center.

And yet, we live without being burdened by the images of poverty; somehow what you see on television seems too far away and not just a few kilometers from home. In the Sudan some of the guilt is absorbed by the fact that images of poverty and

war are daily realities that you cannot escape. You can never protect yourself enough. White South Africa has to deal with these realities after years of being protected from it. They are reacting to it by creating walls and barriers or by leaving, permanently. When the Africa they love and call home, shows its true face they are unable to cope with it.

Rian Malan says that some of white South Africans supported apartheid, some didn't but that they all had one thing in common: " We approached Africa in fear and trepidation, or better yet, we didn't approach Africa at all... We had yet to come to terms with Africa... How do you come to terms with something you don't really understand?"<sup>5</sup> One can forgive South Africans for living the deception of apartheid for generations, but only as much as we Sudanese can be forgiven for the fact that we live next door to racial injustices, famine, war and atrocities carried out in the name of religion and politics.

Sudanese people are now living in a schizophrenic situation within the Sudan, or like South Africans, escaping the harsh economic realities and the Sudanese version of the 'cultural revolution'. Islam entered the Sudan peacefully, from the north, and across the red sea and through western Sudan from Mauritania and other West African countries. It was a non-militant Islam that mingled with existing cultures and created harmonious communities and a Sufi culture that had a flavor of its own.

In the nineties, Sudan became internationally known for its unforgiving, rigid militant Islam. Speculated associations with 'Islamic terrorism' are still mentioned here and there. Horror stories of happenings in the south of the country and in the prisons (or 'ghost houses') were then exposed by organizations such as Amnesty International



and Africa Watch. What remained as a result of this raging violence was a cultural emptiness. Superficiality had been imposed on the country, while the destruction of all else has been almost complete. 'Healing' will be a long and painful process.

As images of wealth (the discovery of abundant oil reserves), progress (the sudden interest of foreign investors and the influx of foreign money), a building boom and cultural revival (Khartoum being the cultural capital of the Arab world for 2005) have

In both contexts, cultural contradictions have found their way into our built environment. The super-imposition of different concepts in one building that can be found in the two countries exposes the cultural uncertainties faced by its peoples.

### **Islamic Revival, Chameleons, Politicians and Architecture**

“ A muezzin  
with gelded  
tongue.....  
A politician.....  
fearing fear”

(Excerpts from ' So God Became a Chameleon', Jack Mapanje)

The Sudanese do not constitute a homogeneous population. According to Esposito and Voll, only 39% are identified as people of Arab stock. More than one hundred languages are spoken in the country, and there is a larger number of distinctive ethnic and communal groups. But Islam is recognized as a common bond between the majority, that is 75% of the population. In this pluralistic society, central governments: “...have to rely on military means to stay in power.”<sup>6</sup>

The quest for continuing power by the ruling parties means that religion is their

strongest weapon: it is difficult to question. Politicians change their language and beliefs as the situation requires: the call for a return to a forgotten Sudanese identity, the call for Islamic authentication or 'taseel' and the story goes on, as politicians discard one coat for another.

The quest for complete Islamic reform has, sadly led to fanaticism and narrow-mindedness. It has led to the denial of all other cultures of the Sudan and focused on its Islamic past, despite the fact that the Sudan has a rich history preceding the advent of Islam and is an extremely vibrant and varied context as we have seen. "Intellectuals critical of the regime have been detained, jailed, and at times, tortured."<sup>7</sup>

As for the architectural scene practicing architects in Sudan seem to be in a state of frustration. Omer Siddig Osman, a practicing architect in Khartoum says the introverted approach to life in general "...is damaging". He continues: "Knowledge is common property for humanity, we cannot stop progress." Another response to the 'authentication' trend from Jack Iskanes, also a Sudanese architect, is as follows: "What is happening in the architectural scene in Sudan is chaos. It is very conventional. Many of the buildings are still being designed in the style of the old school of A/Munim Mustafa."

There is no precedent of life or culture of what the authorities are trying to 'revive'. This can be the only explanation of the ugliness and cheap imitation that has been inflicted on our capital town. But the Islamic resurgence can actually be identified with that happening in other parts of the world and is an international trend, with different characteristics in different contexts. It has given rise to debates on Islamic thought and culture. Architecture of the Islamic world or Islamic architecture has

been under scrutiny.

'Authentication' or 'Taseel' of Sudanese culture and education has had major disruptive effects in all fields of life. It has destroyed educational institutes, it has uprooted communities and created a legacy of cultural confusion never before experienced in the history of the country. In the built environment, it has had drastic implications.

According to Arkoun: "...architectural production in Islamic countries risks falling prey to chaos which can result in a hybrid architecture of bad quality, representing only a caricature of Islam devoid of spiritual precepts."<sup>8</sup>

A legacy of 'fake facades', that have no intrinsic value is being encouraged in the Sudan and is having much influence on practicing architects. Religious fanaticism is not the only reason for what is happening in the built environment of Khartoum, but an aspiration to resemble the image that we, as Sudanese have of the affluent oil-producing states, Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States. The Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world, it is no wonder that we dream of the extraction of Sudanese crude oil and the promises it brings with it.

In one attempt at 'taseel' the main building of the modest Khartoum airport was given a new 'facelift'. A simple modern structure, it needed 'authentication' for it to exist as the meeting point of the Sudan with the rest of the world. Here again one can sense the need to relate to the countries of the east.

Naturally, it is not just the present government officials who have imposed their personal whims in some way or the other. President Nimir ordered the building of

a students project when he attended the graduation of architectural students at Khartoum University. The resulting building was the Nilien Mosque on the Nile, a building that looks like the student's white cardboard and gypsum model. Standing there for years, this prominent landmark, has still not touched the ground of the site but hovers uncomfortably above it.

Practicing architecture in a context like Sudan's is very difficult. In a scheme for an upper class residential area in Khartoum, a different approach was attempted in the proposal for the general layout of the neighborhood as well as the exploration of alternative forms for the individual houses and the residential blocks. Because of numerous mosques around the site, a 'zawia' (a small semi-open prayer space that is not used for 'gumaa'-Friday-prayer) was planned in the middle of a central public space on the site. Instead, a very large mosque was suggested instead, next to the building that housed the Sudanese Council of Churches on the western side of the site! The residential buildings, when construction commenced, proved to be transformed beyond recognition to the designers- who managed to remain unaffected simply because they had traveled to various parts of the world and were too involved in their individual careers to attempt a losing battle with the authorities.

Older buildings of Khartoum are more successful in their climatic and contextual response, than what is being produced at present. What was known as the A/Munim school, which influenced many architects throughout the 60's till present, produced good quality, unpretentious architecture. It was characterized by the use of facing brick panels with wide cantilevered concrete fascias. It was certainly more rich in its architectural language and its climatic suitability. Studies of light, form, openings and voids, the layering of a building creating a series of spatial experiences, the linking of outdoor to indoor while at the same time providing

sufficient protection from the hot dusty climate: these are some identifying elements of the style. Despite the fact that local materials and form were not experimented with, it was a genuine search for excellence in architecture.

There also appears to have been, to some degree, uninhibited explorations that led to a variety of styles during the same period. One can sense a time when there was a lot of thought, a visual dialogue that was in effect, probably in the 1960s and 70s. It was a much more light hearted dialogue than that evident in more recent buildings and much better in terms of quality. The ideas and design search seem to be stimulating. It is unfortunate that nothing was written about these buildings, as very little is being written about buildings in the Sudan now.

The national council, designed by a Romanian architect, stands proudly near the Mogran (the meeting point of the two Niles) witness to an age when views towards nationalism were more balanced. It has probably been extremely difficult to make any changes or additions to it because of the very nature of its design. It does not offer the opportunities of the pure plain surfaces of other modern buildings.

But there is another interesting story about the fence surrounding the national council that nicely represents the political history of the Sudan. It is said that Nimeri (who ruled for 16 years) asked for it to be designed so that there were 25 smaller steel bars and 5 longer ones to indicate the day he came to power by military coup, that is the 25th of May. When the next democratic government came to power, the 5th rod was cut shorter so that the group of 4 rods now represents the month that it came to power, that is April. This just shows how new governments want to wipe out all memory of previous regimes, even when it comes to such comical levels.

There are some present day explorations that if developed might lead the country out of its architectural confusion. They represent seeds that need to be cultivated. Only a few examples are looked at here.

Osman Elkheir has adopted a completely different approach to the design of his home. It seems to bear no resemblance to any historical or cultural precedents in the area and is also difficult to identify with trends elsewhere. The house is closed in onto itself with solid walls and few, small openings. It does not have a central courtyard. The compact design creates a refuge from the harsh weather of the area. There is no attempt to link it up with the surrounding site, no large verandahs or overhangs. Even the incorporated wind-shafts are hidden out of sight and are not emphasized visually.

Hayder is more courageous than his peers in the play with form and, to some extent, ready to take risks with construction and structures. Nevertheless, some of his later buildings seem to have fallen prey to the general trend in the country. A hybrid style with no cohesion emerges with borrowed elements from here or there. The scale of some buildings also seems to be disrupted in a way when the borrowed forms do not always relate comfortably with the general size of the buildings in question. The legibility is compromised when constituent components like doors or overhangs resemble windows or balconies. The architectural language is forced on rather than intrinsic to the designs.

The Sudanese architect Jack Iskhans is one of the few who is in a process of searching for a true Sudanese architecture by searching for environmental, cultural and historical clues. Although there may be some reservations about the eclectic nature of his designs, his work generates much retrospection. He is attempting, not

only to revive the old style of Nubia, but also to merge the visual and spatial identities of Suakin, the old ruins of a port town on the Red Sea, as well as the more recent house designs of the town of old Halfa that was drowned by the construction of the Aswan dam.

Some of the buildings are characterized by irregularities here and there that echo the use of mud in the old buildings of Nubia. They appertain to a very affluent society and a very ancient culture. They relate to the context in a very genuine way, and, if not for the strikingly white facades, do not seem far removed from the mud buildings scattered around the country. It is a building type to which we can relate. The white color is actually unfortunate since it does not have any cultural or historical significance and is very inappropriate to the dusty climate. But, Ishkanes has also recently experimented with other colors and, uncharacteristic to Sudanese architects, with alternative materials.

The above architects, whether we differ or agree with their different approaches, are actually contributing much more to the advancement of architecture in the context of Khartoum, and in Hayder's case throughout the country as he works extensively elsewhere, and their work is a relief among the confusion in the country.

Despite the fact that the Sudan has a historical wealth that can be drawn from for ideas and inspiration, we seem to be faring much worse than South Africa where the search for a regional architecture is much more advanced and started much earlier in time. South African architects are exploring building forms and materials suitable to the climate and the historical and cultural context, all within the complex realities of the country.

### **Cultural Revival and Politically Correct Architecture.**

South Africa is a very complex country. With eleven official languages, an extremely varied population, and a history of not only white crimes against the blacks, but also tremendous atrocities carried out by the same racial groups against each other. After peaceful revolutionary changes in the country, people are embarking on the difficult journey towards social integration and reconciliation.

White South Africans are faced with the challenge of demonstrating that they actually belong to the context and can relate to other racial groups on a basis of social equity, that they are able to have a different attachment to the African context other than that of being the 'masters' who are served by the 'blacks'. More valid bonds need to be created between people and their context other than that identified by Roger Fisher in an defining the Afrikaner people: "The common bond does seem to be a sense of African landscape and of dwelling on African soil..."<sup>9</sup> The fascination with South Africa's diverse landscape, a fascination that we all experienced, does not make us South African. Nor does the will to settle permanently in South Africa make one South African.

There is a dilemma faced by the white South Africans that actually reflects both positively and negatively on the built environment. Rian Malan writes about their attempts as white boys growing up in the white neighborhoods of South Africa to 'boost their sense of self-righteousness' by writing black slogans on the walls of the neighborhood: " In our imaginations, painting 'I'm Black & I'm Proud' on a wall was an entirely logical act of subversion. In the real South Africa it was pointless. That embankment lay in a lily-white neighborhood where few blacks would see it and few who did could read it. In a day or two, the wall was sandblasted clean, and the grim mechanics of apartheid ground on regardless."<sup>10</sup> This somehow relates to the borrowing of cultural clues and symbols from the black South African environment



and incorporating it in buildings in 'lily white neighborhoods'.

There is a genuine will for achieving peace and harmony to the extent that people are embarking on impossible missions of achieving immediate integration, which is feigned and has no true meaning. Despite the general optimism, results at cultural and historical revival sometimes seem to be rather hollow.

White South Africa still has the same interest and fascination that it probably had in the Black South Africa when the Dutch first landed in the Cape. Rian Malan tells the story of Lelyveld who "... recounts a meeting with Credo Matwa, a renowned sangoma and author who once ran a state-supported witchcraft museum in Soweto. In Lelyveld's eyes, Mutwa seems a charlatan, and (the museum) ...set up by the ruling white racists to fool foreign tourists into believing that 'these people really are different in more ways than you can imagine'..... The Africa he portrayed was an almost perfect reflection of the Africa the whites want to see."<sup>11</sup> The Africa that the blacks are trying to escape.

Black Africans see white lifestyles as their ultimate aim. They want to live the life of whites. They want large sub-urban villas, swimming pools and all the consumer goods available to the white South African. Some small size replicas of sub-urban homes can be seen in the townships: the detached houses in the center of a plot resembling the generous land distribution in the white areas.

In the recent South African movie a white lawyer is sympathetic with black culture, while the black lawyer is adamantly fighting it because he sees it as a primitive culture that is holding his people back from progress; the same contradiction happening in all aspects of life in South Africa: the whites trying to suppress their guilt by adopting aspects from a culture they can not understand, and the blacks

aspiring to whatever symbolizes power and wealth.

South Africa, on the positive side, seems to always create a captivating atmosphere for thought and contemplation. The process of transformation in the country is intriguing. Symbols of apartheid are quickly regaining other meanings and portraying different images. It is interesting to read Christopher Hope's representation of Pretoria, the city where 'the real damage is done'.<sup>12</sup>

The sober atmosphere of the Pretoria of the past reminds one of the present situation of Khartoum. Hope sarcastically writes: "...whoever adds so much as a jot or tittle of wit or gaiety to the perception of the strait-laced capital of South Africa should be clutched to the bosom of the beloved country and congratulated."<sup>13</sup>

It is amazing to see the change in meaning that the places and buildings of Pretoria have come to have, notably without the 'wipe out' mentality of the subsequent central governments in Khartoum. Hope describes the Union Buildings as "our very own Kremlin... well placed to frighten passers-by."<sup>14</sup> In his bitter narrative of the 'capital of apartheid', Hope continues to recount the formidable character of the Pretoria suburbs of Brooklyn, Arcadia, Hatfield, of the Voortreker Monument, Church Square and of the beautiful Victorian building, Melrose House that 'awaits around the corner': "...history awaits around the corner, like a beggar, a mugger, a whore."<sup>15</sup>

In the post-apartheid Pretoria, one has a whole new perception of the city, and the places and landmarks have come to have new meanings, as the country struggles with issues of progress, without denial of its past.

The history of architecture in the country is divided into black and white as much as that division has been evident in terms of the 'separate development' culture that preceded even apartheid. White South Africa has a rich history of architecture, that has gone through the phases of development that can be found in the rest of the world. Before colonial intrusion, there were established settlements of African people of different ethnic backgrounds. The advent of the white man meant the interruption of the development of those settlements, but the progress of the white settlements.

Of Johannesburg, Carl Jeppe is quoted by Chipkin to have said in 1906: "Those who marvel at Johannesburg...are often not aware that the wonder is even greater than it appears at first sight. For not one but three Johannesburgs were built at the same time. In some of the streets the strata of the three periods can still be detected. First came the primary- the corrugated iron stage; next the age of the one or two storied buildings; finally, these were again demolished to make room for the edifices of which any city might be proud."<sup>16</sup>

And thus, with the advent of the alien culture, the old settlement patterns of the local Africans, their buildings and emerging industries were wiped out as the selfish enthusiasm of the colonialists trudded on, regardless of what destruction it inflicted on the land and its peoples. The history of settlements in South Africa is a history of gradual loss, with no cultural continuity, for some people, but a history of progress, a natural learning process, for others.

In a limited number of situations the different cultures merged and sustained each other. Peter Rich explores the development of the settlements of the southern Ndebele (Mapoggas) and how their hybrid art and architecture was a means of

retaining their identity in the face of white domination and how they have assimilated and absorbed the two worlds of their own traditions and western influence. "Their art and architecture has blossomed both in response to historical events that befell them and as a direct consequence of white people."<sup>17</sup>

But, as time went on the black South African suffered great losses. Pride in their local identity was lost as cultures were systematically uprooted and replaced by a culture of dependence. The layout of the workers compounds at the South African mines where many of the black mineworkers lived resembles a rough sketch by a prisoner of a 'ghost house' where he allegedly says that he was detained and tortured in Khartoum east.<sup>18</sup>

But as the blacks lived in the barren, sterile landscapes of the townships where there were rows and rows of the inhumane and notorious NE51 house units or in the South African version of 'ghost houses' and worked in miserable conditions as house workers or on the mines, white South Africa continued to flourish and progress. Johannesburg went through the stages of experimenting with Victorian and Edwardian styles, modernity, neo-Classicism and art deco. International influences can be detected in South African cities as its architects embraced ideas adopted from Brazil, America and Europe.

As the NE51 design was being designed and implemented in the black townships, housing design in the white suburbs of Pretoria, for example, was undergoing great developments. Roger Fisher explains the complexities of regionalism as opposed to internationalism: "It requires an empathetic mind and a sensitivity to local circumstance. Thus it is a more personalised architecture and therefore more difficult to impart, other than through tradition and example."<sup>19</sup>

Out of this rich history of white South Africa, Architects like Kate Otten are experimenting with a new architecture. In the reptile complex for the Johannesburg Zoo: “The surroundings are designed to have carefully placed vegetation, raw plaster and rock walls and towers creating African landscapes, and artworks to form dividers to keep ones focus on a particular exhibit...”<sup>20</sup> Undulating roofs, patterns, rough finishes, immense care for details executed by craftspeople are characteristics of Otten’s work. “The aesthetic of a space is as important a value as any other function. The sculptural nature of a space influences people emotionally. Architecture has the power to uplift and spaces should have the power to evoke emotional responses, to impose their mood on occupants and replenish a tired spirit.” Kate Otten says: “I talk to trees, snakes and buildings.”<sup>21</sup> Her buildings have a spirit of their own.

Peter Rich is an architect who searches for clues in the African environment to incorporate in his hybrid buildings. He borrows from a variety of sources including CR Makintosh, the Zimbabwe ruins, the southern Ndebele spatial patterns. Rich continues to derive contextual clues for his buildings. In a recent project proposal the architectural elements are: “...reinterpretations of architectonic elements traditionally associated with Tswana architecture. Reference is made, with dignity, to the material usage learnt from the past.”<sup>22</sup> His continuous work, and success, as architect for underprivileged communities is interesting, as is the work of Noero Wolff Architects.

The achievements of Noero Wolff Architects in formulating an architectural language suitable to the context of South Africa has been commended in numerous publications. The aesthetic of corrugated iron sheeting, very much a part of the South African landscape for a long time, has been developed and perfected by

Noero Wolff architects. Their deep understanding of the contexts of black townships has developed through years of interaction. In their statement about the winning proposals for the Red Location in Port Elizabeth, where a museum of apartheid is to be built as the first phase of a project to rehabilitate the corrugated iron houses in the area, build a conference center etc., they explain their concept as evolving “...around the notion of how to remember the past and how to use these memories to illuminate the future.”<sup>23</sup> On the role of the profession in the contemporary context of South Africa: “The recent changes in South Africa have created a challenging set of conditions in which to work. On the one hand is the perfectly reasonable desire to tangibly represent the past and the changes that have occurred over the last 5 years or so. For example there is talk of an African Renaissance. On the other hand there is a recognition that there is no single truth and that formal representation is complex and unpredictable. It is apparent that it is very challenging and complex to give appropriate expression to the very palpable need to make monuments and museums to learn and remember from the apartheid past.”<sup>24</sup>

In their terms, a progressive rather than pathological conservation was sought where people live and work, where the relics of the past are adjusted to new purposes so that: “...the buildings become makers of the past by their continued presence...” The design search is refreshing. The resulting proposals for the museum reflect the clarity of structure characteristic to Noero Architects, and colorful totem poles and ‘memory boxes’ containing graphic material create the identity of the place.

And the inspiring search goes on in the South African context as architects try to discover new roles that architecture can play in the healing process. The fact that there is still not enough contribution from black South African architects is expected

now and for some years to come. It will be interesting to see their responses to the past and their planning for the future. Maybe they will have been brought up in the new South Africa where the apartheid past will not haunt them as it does present generations.

### **Final Words**

As is evident the paper is very selective in what it portrays in terms of the examples given. It is not intended to be a complete study of architecture in the two contexts, but a comparative study that takes into account only the aspects relevant to the issues in question: the search for regional identities and the scope of the architectural profession.

The difference between the two 'rainbow nations' is great, and they both portray the difficult situation in which architects are placed. The Sudan has a rich heritage which, if ideas are drawn from it and some continuity attempted, new fascinating directions for development could be achieved. We are instead in a state of loss and confusion. Disillusioned with the world and our own very minor role in its enlightenment and advancement, we have chosen to turn our backs on all progress. Instead of focusing on ways of directing the country out of its loss, we demonstrate regularly on the broken down streets of Khartoum and elsewhere using slogans like 'no to foreign interference in our internal affairs' which reads like 'go away, let us kill each other in peace'. We are also too arrogant to embrace ideas from the outside world and want to 'eat what we grow, wear what we produce' etc. Which would be a notable breakthrough, if only we were not so preoccupied with war and famine to be able to re-establish our deteriorating agricultural areas and our factories. We have also been regularly informed by our, not so reliable, government authorities, that we have become the strongest nation in the world!

It is impossible in such a situation to be genuinely productive and to explore new territories. The only thought is survival, and that does not just mean in terms of economic pressures or avoiding political antagonism, but it also refers to inherent values, social cohesiveness, cultural heritage. It refers to the strength of will required to be able to survive within the walls of an asylum.

The ugliness has caught on. Writers, poets, artists, musicians have been entangled in its web, and it has become the characteristic norm of the cultural scene. Military music bellows out of every television set and radio. Paintings and sculptures are destroyed. Thinkers are detained in 'ghost houses'. Our only preoccupation is that of maintaining our sanity and integrity within the country, or fleeing. Sometimes only to discover that the world has more asylums that we thought imaginable!

South Africa has come out of its 'dark ages' only recently. Yet, its people are rejoicing their new found freedom and embracing it in delightful ways. One reads into the history of the country, intrigued at the changes that have happened so peacefully, and that have been absorbed so readily by the people. But, not all is a rosy picture. Real integration of the South African people will take many years to be a reality, if it ever is. The black population will need much time and effort and money from the authorities and from communities if they are to progress. The whites are now in a process of validating their African identity, and getting over their guilt. All should go well, hopefully, if increasingly horrifying crime rates do not bring the country to its knees in disintegration and despair.

Despite all, one can only marvel at the processes of re-conciliation in the country. Atrocities in the name of religion were also committed and the church not only forbid racial mixing, but its influence was felt in all aspects of life.<sup>25</sup> People and



institutes seem to have dis-entangled themselves from the churches' clutches at some time. In the Sudan political influence, in the name of religion, has been thorough and just as well organized, but can one hope that it is only skin deep?

In both contexts, the architectural profession still needs to validate its stance. We are still being questioned on the legitimacy of the profession. Box-like housing units around Johannesburg, not any different from apartheid's infamous designs, are being painted pastel pinks, blues and yellow. Problems of urban sprawl, commuting, service provision and environmental degradation are far from being resolved. In the Sudan, we are neither producing good buildings at the smaller scale, nor benefitting communities at the larger scale. Our profession has been unable to answer to the pressing problems of the people.

Alternative approaches for generating architecture have been called for before, and if these issues are not answered it will be difficult to defend the profession any longer. The scope of the professions in both contexts seems to be limited, our contributions to the general uplifting of societies can be immense, yet at present they are minimal.

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*Since Sudanese architecture has not been documented much and since Sudanese architects are not writing about their work, and since there is no Sudanese publication concerned with architecture, I have had to contact the mentioned architects individually. I am very grateful for their assistance, the photos they sent and the replies to my questions via e-mail. I am greatly indebted to them and also to those who have assisted me but their names have not appeared in the text: Mr. Hamdi and Prof. Agra. I hope that I have done justice to the situation in Sudan. Most of all my thanks to my mentor and my father Omer Siddig Osman who, as*

*always, assisted me greatly.*

Much research focuses on the physical aspects of architecture, inherent symbolism, cultures, climates, and on the delimitation of architectural regions. While the importance of these studies is not under-estimated, it is attempted in this paper to approach the issues of architectural practice in Africa differently to allow for sharing of experiences.

The concerns of architects in Africa are basically to do with the effectiveness of the profession in terms of:

- \* the scope of the profession- who benefits?
  - the suitability of its products

Both are faced with problems of social instability, poverty, uncertain futures, migration, cultural and environmental disruption.

Survival in terms of economy, heritage and environment occupy the thoughts of professionals and questions arise in both contexts as to how environmental interventions should be directed.

Yet, if we use the words reveal, open, rebuild, negotiate to describe South Africa we can also describe the Sudan by the following: conceal, close, destroy, intolerance. In the Sudan, inherent problems are being suppressed while South Africa is revealing its problems and seeking solutions. Whatever difficulties are being faced,

It is an attempt to recover what has been lost in terms of the collective memory of its people.

While in both contexts professionals are struggling to maintain the integrity of the

profession, the major difference is seen in that one context seems to be offering opportunities to the profession to contribute to the 'healing process' while the other context is in a state of 'denial' as to the very existence of problems.

Alternative approaches may contribute to ways of making the architectural profession 'work' for the people of Africa.

The profession is catering for the needs of small strata of society. This is evident, for example, in that we are still unable to contribute to peoples' housing processes in a way that validates the very existence of our profession, despite major paradigm shifts in the way that we view housing,

Sub-urban housing and its commercial developments are determining the form and shape, the very character of our cities today. The urban layout of our cities is seriously compromising the environment, as well as the general well being of people in the cultural, social and moral sense.