

A critique of the spoliation of the ridges of the capital city of South Africa

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Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa, is discussed in terms of the detrimental effect of monuments and the monumentalising of structures of ideological significance built on its surrounding ridges, which more than any other natural assets, define its sense of place and influenced the original urban conceptualisation. The discussion of existing monuments and other structures which are indifferent to its sense of place will be followed by a brief discussion of Freedom Park, the most recent addition, which is a government project sponsored by the ruling African National Congress party, which has recently been completed on Salvokop at the main southern entrance to the city. The survey of the monuments, military and other structures lead to the conclusion that their creation was mainly inspired by ideologies on which the ruling political powers wished to bestow visibility by erecting them on elevated sites.

'n Kritiese beskouing oor die skade aan die rantjies in die hoofstad van Suid-Afrika

Pretoria, die hoofstad van Suid-Afrika, word bespreek in terme van die nadelige effek van die oprigting van monumente en die monumentalisering van strukture van ideologiese belang op die omringende rantjies wat, meer as enige ander natuurlike bates, die pleksin daarvan bepaal en ook die oorspronklike stedelike konseptualisering beïnvloed het. Die bespreking van bestaande monumente en ander strukture wat sonder inagneming van pleksin opgerig is, word gevolg deur 'n kort bespreking van Freedom Park, die mees onlangse byvoeging, 'n regeringsprojek wat deur die heersende African National Congress-party op Salvokop by die suidelike hoofingang van die stad opgerig is. Die opname van monumente, militêre en ander strukture lei tot die gevolgtrekking dat hulle ontstaan hoofsaaklik geïnspireer is deur ideologieë waaraan die heersende politieke bewindhebbers sigbaarheid wou verleen deur hulle op hoë plekke op te rig.

A monument is a physical object, such as an architectural structure or statue, displayed in public and intended to remind viewers of specific individuals or events.¹ Defining a monument in terms of function and iconography is relatively easy. Primarily monuments are erected to celebrate military victories. No matter when or where they are fought, all wars - and one may add all armed political struggles - have one thing in common: a relentless progression of monuments and memorials for the dead.² Furthermore, monuments are erected to celebrate the prominent stature and prestige of a living or deceased political leader, or to serve as political statements rooted in some current ideology. Thus, monuments erected to commemorate political events are a common phenomenon throughout history and all over the world. However, few architectural historians have protested the practice that a nation's resources are spent on structures that are ideological and extravagant, while few enlightened people will contest the fact that ideologies are unstable. In most cases monumental structures harm the environment, are built on prime urban land with a high visibility,³ and actually encourage a false sense of memory of the historical truth which they are supposed to commemorate. Nevertheless, the sheer monumentality of most of these structures, which are sometimes aggrandized by auxiliary statues, usually afford them a visibility in places where they often have a negative impact, not creating a sense of place that endures because the vicissitudes of nations and societies change.

An overview of Pretoria's topology and main monuments

Since the unification of the four independent provinces of South Africa in 1910 Pretoria has been its capital city. What is at present a sprawling metropolis started as a modest nineteenth-century Voortrekker settlement in a place with a characteristic topography of two parallel ridges,⁴ forming a flood plain in between (figure 1). Like a Roman *castro* it was developed on a grid system with a central square, called Church Square (figure 2). Around this square the descendants of the Dutch colonists developed their government buildings, which are still architectural

landmarks in the city, while the ridges remained unspoilt as the characteristic natural features of the city. However, the original conceptualisation was disrupted by undiscerning expansion, forgetting the social importance of unblemished nature, so succinctly formulated by Ronald Jones (1871: 45): “A sense for harmony [...] is evoked and strengthened by the sight of organic nature around us, in so far as commercial civilization still permits us.”

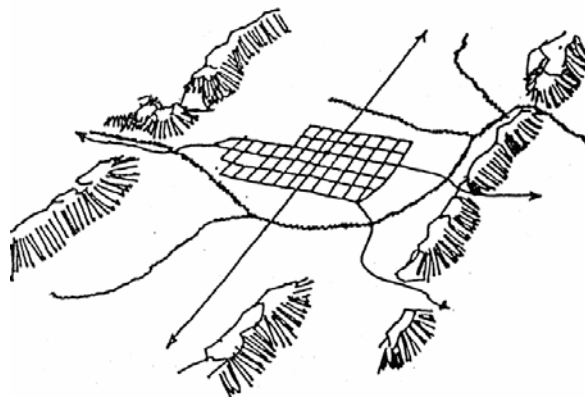


Figure 1

Diagram showing the earliest development of Pretoria in the flood valley between the parallel ridges

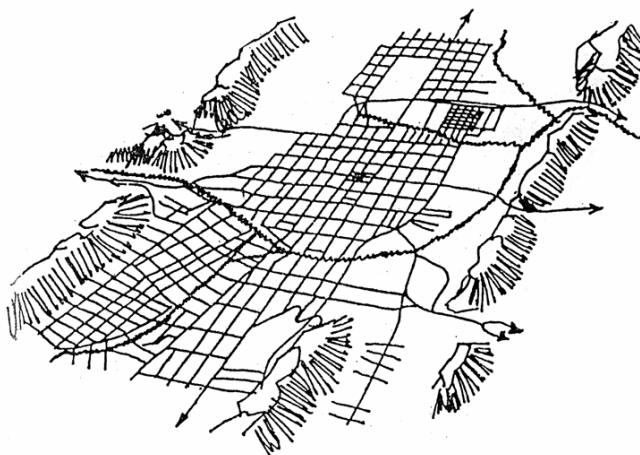


Figure 2

Diagram showing the extension of Pretoria during the first half of the twentieth century

During the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1904) sunken fortifications were built on the hill commonly known as Skanskop,⁵ which is at present disfigured by a microwave tower (figure 8). The low military structures had little impact on the topography or ecology of the ridges which remained natural features of the city until 1910. Then the Union Buildings, designed by Sir Herbert Baker, were built on the lower slope of Meintjieskop where there was an excavation from which slate was quarried. Fortunately the envisaged temple structures on the top of the ridge were never built (figure 3). This building was the seat of government of the Union of South Africa, but in a sense it is a cultural monument, emblematic of the unity of the two Western colonial groups, Afrikaans and English, who jointly ruled the country to the exclusion of the indigenous black

people. However, when former president Nelson Mandela was inaugurated there in 1994 the Union Buildings were appropriated by the black majority. Even though it was not intended to be a monument in the traditional sense of the word, historically the Union Buildings have been afforded the status of a monument as a place of cultural significance.

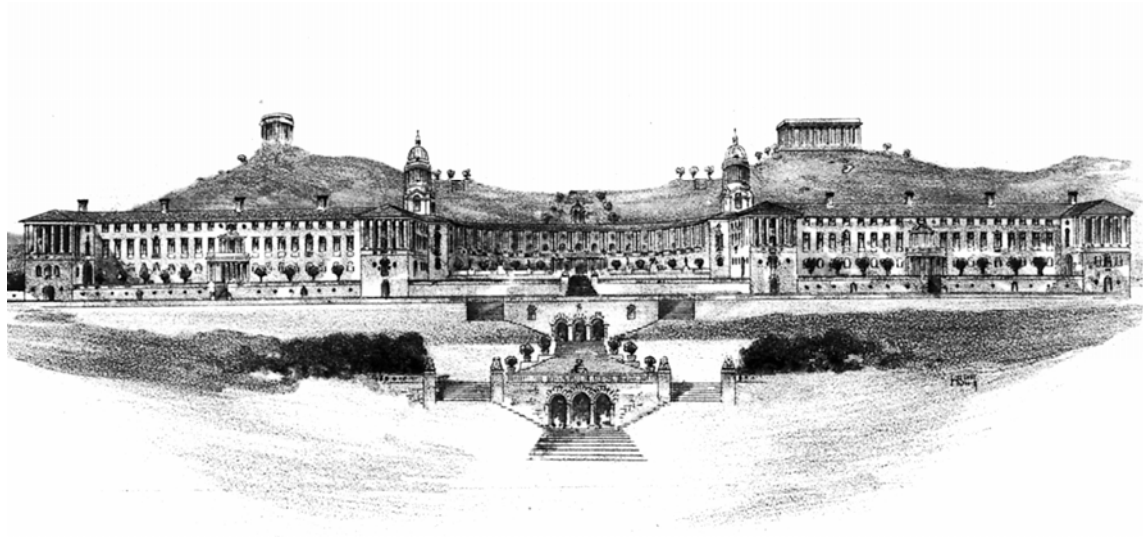


Figure 3
The Union Buildings, showing the temple buildings the architect intended to erect on the ridge

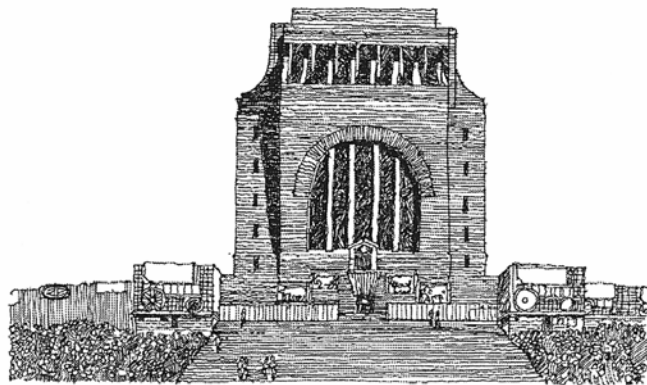


Figure 4
The Voortrekker Monument on the Timeball Hill range

Some decades later the Afrikaners commemorated their ancestors' trek from the Cape Colony to free themselves from British rule by building a monumental fortress, the Voortrekker Monument (figure 4), positioned on an elevated site on the Time Ball Hill, belonging to a geological range, which is not of any strategic or historical relevance to the theme of the monument, to be optimally visible from the old Pretoria-Johannesburg highway. The architect, Gerhard Moerdyk, designed this edifice to remind viewers of the indigenous roots of the Afrikaner by quoting elements of indigenous African stone buildings such as Great Zimbabwe. The Voortrekker Monument has commonly been designated an Afrikaner sacred place until its privatisation as a museum some years ago. It stands in a south/north relationship with the Union Buildings which, under British rule, the Afrikaners came to view as a Neo-classical colonial British place, not belonging in Africa. At present it retains the title of "monument", but has been

privatised for business purposes and attracts more visitors than any other monument in the country.

A further major development took place in 1967 when the previous government built the University of South Africa (Unisa) on Lukasrand, a ridge some distance opposite the Voortrekker Monument, destroying it completely as a natural feature (Fig. 5). Perhaps it could be called the Nationalist Government's "monument" to distance education, making education available to all South Africans, as well as students from African countries and other parts of the world, regardless of race or creed; thus becoming a locus of educational significance. However, even at its inception its monumental modular International Style design was outdated and to a large degree unfunctional in our climate.⁶



Figure 5
The main campus of the University of South Africa on Muckleneuk Ridge, showing the microwave tower on the ridge behind

Besides the buildings referred to, other landmark structures, notably the main microwave tower and other minor ones, were also erected on ridges (visible on figure 5). Obviously these towers have a strategic purpose, but are quite conspicuous on their elevated sites. The exception is the main tower on Lucasrand, close to the Unisa campus, which is architecturally well designed, but was recently disfigured with banners and coloured lights. Finally the ridges are also blemished by the reservoirs, which have a practical purpose, but are disgracefully unaesthetic engineering structures.

How was it possible that Pretoria's Town Planning Department allowed the development of the Voortrekker Monument and Unisa on ridges? A bylaw exists which explicitly forbids constructions on ridges. Notwithstanding the legislation, no environmental impact studies were done before construction started on either the Voortrekker Monument or the Unisa buildings. Their impact is as great as that of the Union Buildings, but in the capital city it is apparently taken for granted that the bylaw requirements need not be met, provided that the structures serve either military purposes or are required for purposes of state.

Clearly, the monumental buildings on the ridges of Pretoria proclaim the power that the clients wielded when they selected peak areas on which to stamp their diverse images. The Union Buildings projects British power, the Voortrekker Monument projects Afrikaner power, and Unisa intellectual power.

The buildings on the ridges feature prominently on the mental maps I asked friends and ordinary citizens of Pretoria to sketch in 1986 (figure 6).⁷ Following the town planning insights about landmarks in a city which enable citizens to orient themselves as developed by Kevin Lynch,⁸ these sketches are perceptual images of Pretoria as it was perceived two decades ago.

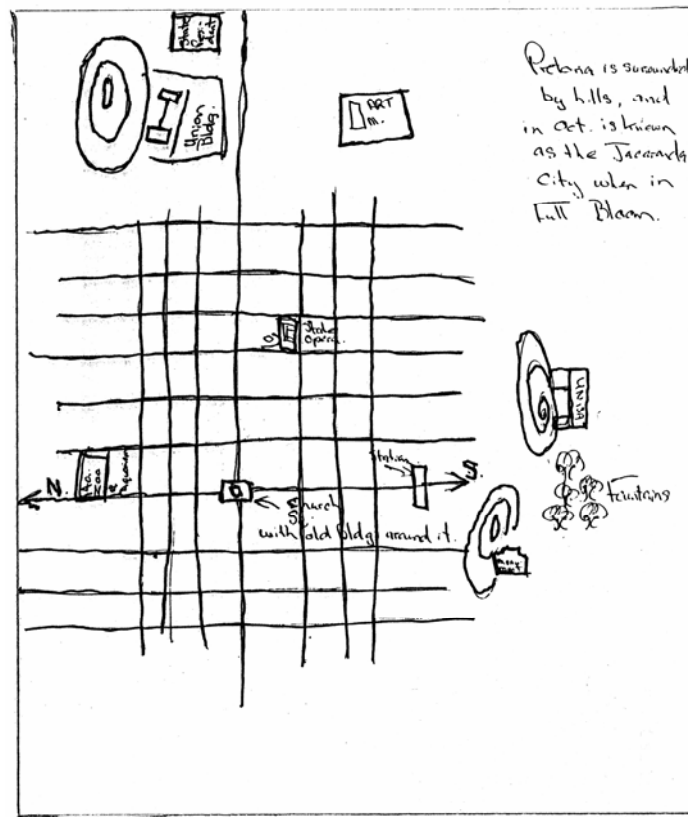


Figure 6
A mental map of Pretoria, dated 1985

Freedom Park

In 2004, the mental image of Pretoria changed because another ridge, Salvokop (initially known as Time Ball Hill), had become the locus of the ANC (African National Congress) Government's venture to build "Freedom Park", a monument to the "Struggle", as the black armed resistance to the apartheid government is called (figures 7 and 8). This monument to the so-called "Struggle" to free South Africa from the apartheid regime is called by the state president the "most ambitious heritage project ever to be undertaken in South Africa".⁹ The design was to be decided on the basis of an international competition and according to the competition documents the cost of the total architectural project was estimated just under one billion US\$. Since no official winner had emerged from the three runners-up announced in July 2003,¹⁰ the Department of Cultural Affairs has appointed a team of traditional healers to allow indigenous people to play a part, landscape architects, architects and planners to design Freedom Park. The first stage, the "Garden of Remembrance", has been completed in 2005 at an approximate cost of seven million US\$.¹¹

The location, selected by a state department of culture because of its high visibility from the Johannesburg freeway, was consecrated by the state president. As in the case of the Voortrekker Monument it has no strategic or historical significance with respect to its function to be a place of remembrance for some two thousand black South Africans who died in the armed struggle against the previous government and whose spirits will come to rest there. However, it is maintained that the Garden of Remembrance has nominally an inclusive significance because all South Africans and visitors are invited there to celebrate freedom for all humanity and "challenged to contemplate the past" – according to the landscape architect Graham A Young, a member of the design team, on whose lecture, delivered on 31 March 2004 at the Architectural Department of the University of Pretoria, I base the following description.



Figure 7
Aerial view of Salvokop, indicating the development of Freedom Park

Young explained that the finalists in the international competition did not base their designs on a close topographical survey of Salvokop but that the new team has taken its ecological situation into consideration. It is a unique site at the natural gateway to the city, which has already been blocked by the Unisa buildings. It is juxtaposed with the Voortrekker Monument and Union Buildings and directly opposite Skanskop with its historic fort and present-day high frequency tower (figure 8). Furthermore, it is in close proximity to the existing railway line, while the proposed Gautrain will pass close by. The site is ecologically unique and it was found that the southern slope is not appropriate for development because of its unique flora and geology. Young admits that there are voices (to which the present author's may be added) suggesting that the hillside should have remained undeveloped. However, he maintains that the present master plan "protects" the hill, a statement that seems far-fetched given the fact that the following structures will be imposed upon it: a monument and a pool of creation on top of the hill (both not designed as yet), an indigenous garden with statues of freedom fighters, called the Garden of Remembrance, and on the western slope a museum and an administrative building.

The Garden of Remembrance consists mainly of stonework derived from the Great Zimbabwe archaeological site – as in the case of the Voortrekker Monument. Furthermore, water features will be introduced for washing of hands as symbolic of cleansing of what was detrimental in the past. However, ascending from the east side of the hill and facing west towards the Garden of

Remembrance there will be perpetual smoke as a reminder of the violence during the struggle years, prior to 1994.¹²



Figure 8
The Garden of Remembrance.
Skanskop, disfigured by a microwave tower, lies to the southeast.

The Garden of Remembrance clearly aspires to be a sacred space, of which Jean McMann says:

A sacred site, whether selected by geomancers, priests, astronomers or all of these, must be consecrated to secure its sacredness, and thus its reality. Through the paradox of rite, every consecrated space coincides with the centre of the world just as the time of any ritual coincides with the mythical time of the "beginning". Concrete, profane time is transformed into mythical time, profane space into transcendental space. Any ritual then, is performed not only in a sacred space, but in sacred time, the original time of the divine Creation.¹³

No matter how they are designed, most monuments are designed for the political indoctrination of those for whose viewing they are intended.¹⁴ Thus, to enhance their ideological and social role, monuments have a clear ritualistic significance, pointed out by Cara Armstrong and Karen Nelson: "The ritual and the monument can embody the essence of events. Monuments can provide a site for a form of permanence in a landscape and imprint events in collective memory. [...] Monuments remind, warn, and suture; they provide public space for recognition, reunion, and mourning."¹⁵ Regarding its ritual function, the completed Freedom Park will probably be no exception to the function of monuments. However, the choice of the elevated site, mainly for its visibility from the northern freeway entering the city, ensures that it will be a permanent feature in an already despoiled landscape, and like its predecessor the Voortrekker Monument, attempting to imprint past events in a collective memory. More than a ritual function the Freedom Park Trust website (accessed 2006-03-28) states as a matter of fact: "The Freedom Park heals and reconciles the South African nation". As a material object no monument can heal a nation. More to the point is the website's concluding statement: "You, similar to every citizen of our country, are also personally invited to commit yourself to this declaration for peace, freedom, and dignity for all mankind." Clearly, no monument is necessary to motivate people to commit themselves to humanitarian ideals.

Richard Klosterman maintains that "value-free planning is impossible in principle because planning is essentially political,"¹⁶ an insight that is especially true of Pretoria in which governments with different ideologies appropriated elevated places to enhance their image.

Pretoria, which was built on a place with superb natural features, is now a city of lost opportunities. It could have been a different city if its natural sense of place had been respected by all who lived there, and especially those who wielded power in the past and their successors in title. Its vistas have been vandalised by conflicting ideologies, thus becoming a place displaying indifference to its natural setting. In a mental map recently drawn by a cultural historian the structures on the ridges are as prominent as in figure 6. By comparison, they receive added emphasis because of the new balance of power exemplified by the addition of Freedom Park on Salvokop (figure 9).

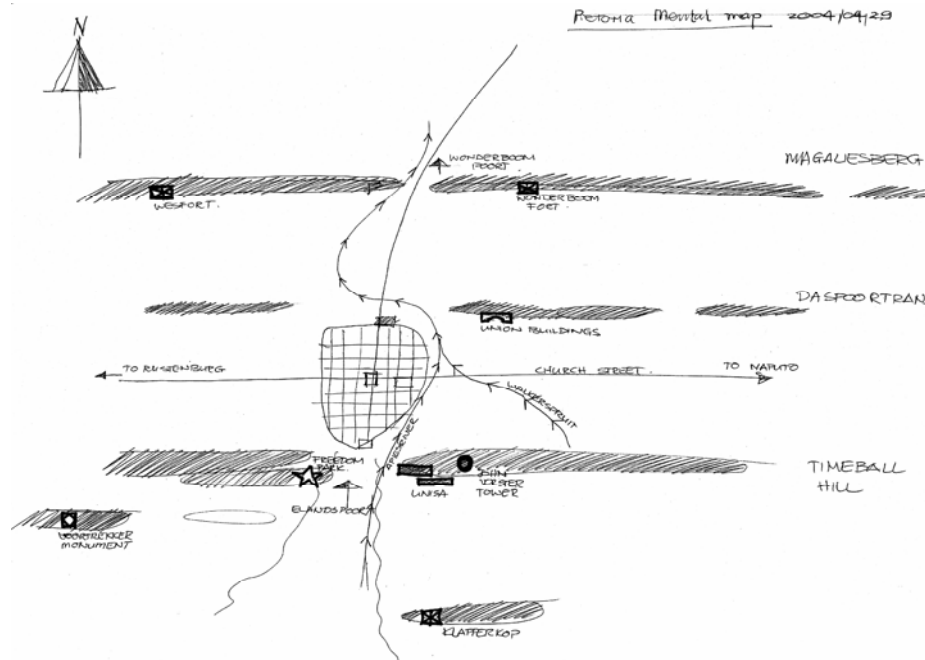


Figure 9
A mental map of Pretoria, dated 2004

Conclusion

The building of monuments cannot escape “the struggle for possession and interpretation of memory [which] is rooted among the conflict and interplay of social, political and cultural interest values in the present”.¹⁷ Neither can the term “appropriate memorialization”, as used in South African heritage law, escape the struggle for the dominance of the mind of a nation. Social, political and cultural values continually change while physical artifacts which celebrate ideologies endure for longer periods of time even though their meaning will inevitably also change in changing contexts and ultimately become irrelevant.¹⁸ Such artifacts, whether they have intrinsic merit as art or architecture (which they seldom have) never deserve prominence as despoilers of natural environments.

Notes

- 1 This definition of a monument is derived from Mark Stocker (1996: 41).
- 2 For a history of military monuments, see James Tatum (2003).
- 3 What Sandra Scham (2004: 649) writes about

the Levant and the Mediterranean is more or less universally true - that “from the earliest periods, the prominence of hills in the landscape have made them the preferred locations for palaces, temples and urban centres”. She could have added the presence of monuments as well.

- 4 Called the Magaliesberg and Daspoort Ridges.

- 5 For a history of the military fortifications erected in Pretoria during the first and second Anglo-Boer Wars, see Ploeger (1869) and Van Vollenhoven (1995).
- 6 See Maré (1996b).
- 7 These sketches were included in the chapter on Pretoria in my DArch thesis. See Maré (1996a).
- 8 See Kevin Lynch (1960).
- 9 Quoted from the documentation of the Freedom Park international architectural competition.
- 10 *Pretoria News* (23 July 2003: 1).
- 11 According to the Freedom Park Trust website (accessed 2006-03-2) the total Freedom Park project will comprise three phases, each with an elaborate programme: the Garden of Remembrance (2003); an intermediary phase (2005-2006), and the second phase (2007-2009). However, the cost of the works is not mentioned.
- 12 Apparently this could not be realised.
- 13 Jean McMann (1980: 150).
- 14 In this regard see Van Vuuren (2003) about ideological meaning of the Machel monument.
- 15 Quoted from Ioan (2002: 29).
- 16 Klosterman (1978: 37).
- 17 David Thelen 1989: 1127.
- 18 This article is a revised and extended version of a paper read at the International Congress *Arquitectura 3000: The Architecture of Indifference*, Barcelona, 30 June-3 July 2004.

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