
After image: Reflections on a Site Specific Artwork

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Summary

This article involves a discussion of the way in which it was attempted to image the multi-layered dialectic between a specific site and the elements of an added structure in terms of the relationship between form and content. The attempt was my contribution to the !Xoe Site Specific Project organized by the Ibis Gallery in the Karoo village of Nieu Bethesda in July 1998. It was entitled: "Breaking the Hoop", an oblique reference to the disruptive process of colonization.

1. The site

This was a barn-turned-garage in the original Nerderduits Gereformeerde Church's parsonage.

My first sight of this building (from now on referred to as the barn), in its relation to the surrounding landscape, particularly the dominant Compasberg, and the socio-political history of the area, informed how an initially vague

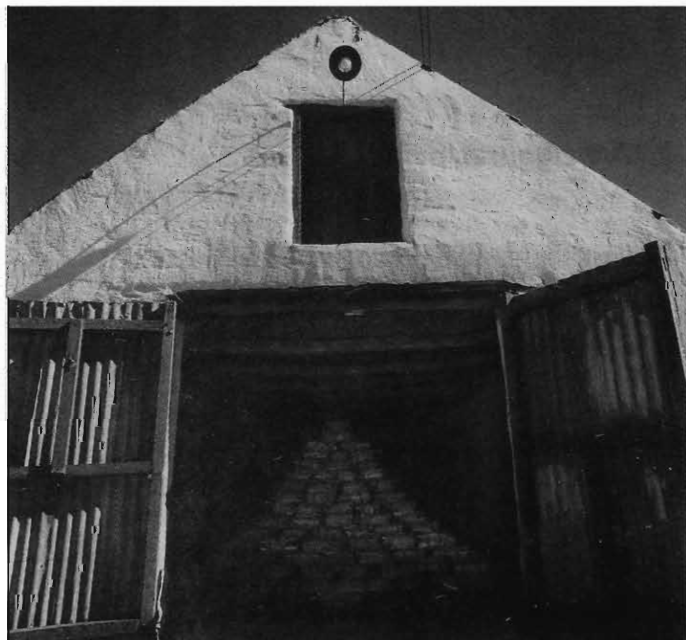
response to Nieu-Bethesda in general was to be transposed into an artwork.

On closer inspection, the configuration of the materials I proposed using was formed. If this configuration was to demonstrate "a deliberate and insistent relationship" (Beardsley, 1984:7) with the site, then it was the site that had to generate the ultimate form of the work. Had this not been the case, then the relationship between the site and the superimposed forms would not be one of symbiotic correspondence, but of formal incongruity and disjunctive meaning. Given the nature of the project, the site had to function as more than just a neutral viewing space or sympathetic backdrop to some primary image or structure. In its provision of shaped space, the site thus became an actual rather than a representational component of the artwork. In fact, so long as the immediate site, the barn, housed the additional 'art' elements, it functioned as an artwork.

Formally, the barn was not perceived as merely a framing entity, a boundary to the additional elements - the ziggurat, the cow-dung plinthe and the five separate bundles of firewood. It was the barn's rectangular proportions rendered more extreme by a low reed ceiling and the tonal and textural differences between ceiling and white-washed brick walls, that, in relation to the ziggurat, engendered the work's meaning. More specifically, it was the containment and compression of the ziggurat (approx. 2.3 metres in height) by that particular building in that particular environment that endowed the work with its significance.

Turning to the significance of the site, the property on which the barn stands is obviously a clearly demarcated territory, and as such, signified the colonial notion of land ownership. According to Noel Mostert (1993:231) referring to the start of the First Frontier War between the Xhosas and the Cape Colony in the second half of the eighteenth century, the "Colonialist believed when they staked out a farm and obtained permission from the Cape to occupy it that the place was theirs absolutely, beyond challenge. The Xhosas had no such belief. The idea of fixed title and exclusive, private posses-

sion was unknown to them. The land belonged to the chief, but the use of it was communal". The indigenous !Xam's sense of territory, claims Mostert, was determined by their hunting and gathering of 'Veldkos' - "whatever was edible and local to the Sneeuberg" (Mostert, 1993:28). Their territories, he continues, were defined by natural landmarks, principally water holes "close to which camps were usually established. Although territorial limits were strictly observed between bands", their life "was one of frequent transience, from one familiar source of food to another" (Mostert, 1993:29). So, the original human inhabitants of the region, the !Xam, had their lifestyle disrupted by the Xhosas and 'trek-



*Front Facade of the Pastorage's Barn.
Photo Tim Hopwood.*

boers', then later altogether destroyed by the European colonialists proprietorial usurpation of land and everything attached to it.

The pastorage also reflects the collective colonial character in the sense that it was the residence of the figure invested with the dissemination and maintenance of their imported belief / value system.

The barn, however, in its art-image guise, and with its rigid confining qualities, more emphatically denoted the subordination, subjugation and domination of nature and the people indigenous to the region that includes Nieu-Bethesda, than does the parsonage property as a whole.

2. The ziggurat/pyramid

Against the parsonage, the ziggurat was used on the one hand, as a metaphor for nature (a human made Compasberg) reflecting what I perceive as nature's interdependence and patterned irregularities; and on the other, in its pyramidal shape, a means of liberally imaging a philosophical contrast and its ideological derivatives. Simply put: the ziggurat refers to nature; while the pyramid refers to Plato ¹



Close-up of firewood bundle
Photo: T Hopwood

The ziggurat's metaphorical role was denoted by the material used to compose it - bundles of firewood covered in part by wax impregnated membranes. Using these irregular forms as units of construction rather than elementary triangles meant that the structure could not assume perfect geometric proportion - requisite for an ideal form that embodied Platonic reason. While the ziggurat's size and placement was suggested by the dimensions of the barn (its receptacle?), its overall shape was determined by the variable shapes of the firewood bundles and not by some mathematical system of ordering. "Considerations of ordering" (Morris, 1993:46) were imprecise and involved stacking the units of wood in a way that conformed to their shape. The slope or gradient of the ziggurat was

achieved by initially laying out parallel rows of bundles to form a square, and then placing the next level of bundles in the furrows created by the row beneath, and so on, until the apex was reached. Thus each level would move in from the previous one by approximately one half of a bundle's diameter.

That the ziggurat was not "a unique copy of a unique eternal model" (Plato, 1965:42) was indicated by its eccentric proportions, the varying textures of the bundles and the interstices plugged with wax, all of which resulted in an organic complexity that precluded the regularity of surface, size and shape. This, together with the fact that it could only be viewed as a continuity of details because of its spatial containment by the barn, resulted in the subversion of both a good gestalt and its reading as an ideal, abstract, geometric form.

Because of its irregularities, the ziggurat could have been taken as an example of Plato's idea of a sensible phenomenon. In other words, the ziggurat could have been described as a poor approximation of his 'perfect' fire-pyramid, just as, according to him, forms in nature are approximate, impermanent copies of a perfect permanent archetype (Cornford, 1937:190). However, I used the ziggurat to contradict the idea of a

megageometric prototype which exists as an ultimate thing-in-itself, independent of and unblemished by the sensible world, and, what is more, intelligible to only "a small number of men" (Plato, 1965:70). My reasoning was that form cannot be viewed in terms of two distinctly separate realities - one physical with divisible, variable, finite characteristics apprehended by the senses; and the other metaphysical, represented by indivisible mathematical form apprehended by a superior / pure intellect. This dichotomized set-up does not account for either the model-to-copy or the form: material relationship. Plato's explanation of the model-to-copy relationship as a process facilitated by space which provides the necessary Receptacle for imitations copied by a Divine Creator while focusing on the perfect forms (Plato, 1965:70), does not explain how forms that are invisible metaphysical, a priori blueprints, can, in the process of replication, become forms opposite, in character. This can only occur if there is an inherent, boundless interconnectivity or interdependence between phenomena, between mind and matter, intelligence and perception, etc. The relevance of this to colonization is that the implicit dualism of Plato's scheme and its theocentric translation gives rise to a schismatic, divisionist type mentality. If certain human's perceive themselves as divorced from nature, supe-

riorly intelligent and purified in a Platonic sense; or, as select associates of an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God presiding from a Perfect Realm, then, by implication, the unselected, whatever the species, are inferior and can therefore be colonized and devalued. If a contrary view is held, one that posits the interdependence and relativity of phenomena with no primal first cause or Divine Creator, then one cannot dissociate oneself from others and from nature in order to autocratically impose upon and dominate what is co-dependent.

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The ziggurat as the focus of *Breaking the Hoop* may, therefore, be described as Plato's fire-pyramid earthed. The pyramid, removed from its apotheosized, sanitized state and organically irregularized, becomes the sensibly imminent ziggurat, a signifier of nature's primacy.

3. The plinthe

Traditionally, a plinthe or base, was, and still is, used to elevate an art object, to set it apart from its surroundings. With the mud and cow-dung rectangle that constituted the ziggurat's plinthe, it was not my intention to comply with or contest this tradition.



Close-up of firewood bundle
Photo: J Ord

Formally, the dark, uneven tones of its component materials with their diminished contrasts, complemented the more tonally and texturally varied facades of the ziggurat. It was this that contributed to the framing of meaning. The plinthe was to the ziggurat what the earth is to a primate - its support and ground. The materials constituting both ziggurat and plinthe in their sameness (their shared organic qualities) and their differences (their tones, textures and obviously, form), reflected the synergy in biodiversity of which the anthropocentric colonialists were oblivious. By providing a stronger contrast, the plinthe enhanced the ziggurat's presence, thus rendering more emphatic the message of uneven relationship that was the quality of interface between colonizer and colonized.

What the plinthe did, then, was to activate the

barn's floor so that it engaged more aptly in the dynamic of the work as a whole.

4. The five bundles of firewood - five perfect figures in nature

I isolated the basic constructs of the ziggurat - the firewood bundles and presented them as five separate elements embedded in the plinthe at the opposite end of the ziggurat, in order to poetically rather than formally oppose Plato's notion that perfect embodiment resides only in certain kinds of rationally constructed mathematical forms (Crombie, 1952-63:307). The chrysalis-like appearance of the bundles caused by their envelopment in simulations of visceral membrane, undeniably suggested form as organic and metamorphic i.e. draped in sensible qualities. This suggestion was necessary to support the proposition that there is nothing (rather than something as Plato proposed), "more fundamental than the actual order of nature" (Crombie, 1952-63:222), that is its changing face of relative causes and conditions. Even if complex, organic forms in nature can be reduced to generic geometric shapes, it cannot therefore be construed that geometric form takes precedence over natural form. Just because Plato's elements of reason, the perfect solids, are mathematical and regular does not

mean that they can be assumed *a priori* models, superior in value. Ascribing absolute value to what is an abstract construct, implies that what is opposite in nature is somehow blemished and therefore inferior. This gives those who position themselves within Platonic or Platonic-like philosophies and religions, justifiable permission to detrimentally treat and exploit that which is perceived as inferior.

5. Breaking the hoop: dismembering the ziggurat

Once the exhibition was over, the ziggurat was dismantled and the firewood bundles given to those disadvantaged members of the Nieu-Bethesda community who would be able to use the wood as fuel.

The significance of the dismemberment relates more overtly to the issue of colonization. It somewhat literally denotes the discontinuity caused by colonization i.e. the extinction or near extinction of indigenous plant and animal species and of indigenous cultural values and belief systems.

Its relation to Plato's theory of forms is a little more complex. His equation of fire with pyramid

is based on the association of what he perceived as a similar quality, namely mobility. According to Plato (Cornford, 1937:225), fire (as an invisible pyramid) breaks down earth (as an invisible cube). This is only possible if its abstract representation, the pyramid, is dissociated from the actual phenomenon, fire. By contrast, in the case of the ziggurat, fire could only occur when it lost its pyramidal (albeit disproportionate) shape. So, the relation of fire to this visible but temporary structure, resided in its dissimilar constituent parts. Freed from ordering an artwork, they could serve their originally intended purpose.

Conclusion

Breaking the Hoop was not a didactic diagram depicting the contemptible aspects of the ideologies and doctrines, associated with the European colonialists. It was an artwork which obliquely, if not abstrusely, revealed its content through a configuration of forms open to the cogitative mind of the Sherlock Holmesian hermeneuticist. For the author, it was a play on Plato's belief in eternal, unchanging, universal absolutes independent of the world of phenomena (Grube, 1980:1). Just as the Europeans colonized South Africa, so the Divine Craftsman

colonized nature with his aesthetico-mathematical rationality (Crombie, 1952-63:210)

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Notes

1. I have unorthodoxly used Plato's Theory of Forms, his account of the universe and a divine creator to signify the European colonizer's tendency to, firstly, view themselves as 'ubermensch'; and, secondly, to impose their idea of order where order already existed, albeit of a different kind.