

Erich Mayer's depiction of the vernacular hut and multiple hut building tradition

Mauritz Naudé

April 2002. Department of Architecture, Technikon Pretoria, Private Bag X680, Pretoria, 0001.
E-Mail: mauritz@nfi.org.za

Erich Mayer is not considered as one of South Africa's well-known and significant artists. Regardless of this, South Africa has inherited a few thousand drawings and watercolour paintings from Mayer that are of incalculable value to historians and cultural historians. His work has also not been "discovered" and exploited by architectural historians interested in South African vernacular architecture. Mayer visited various regions in South Africa and made drawings of the simple vernacular homesteads and other structures he saw on the farms and in the smaller villages and hamlets. Most of the buildings have now probably disappeared and the drawings are the only evidence of building types that otherwise could only have survived through oral traditions and legends. The buildings vary from beehive structures covered with grass mats in the North West, "kapsteil" dwellings in Namaqualand, to Bushveld dwellings with gables and thatched roofs. Mayer also made a contribution to the recording of the crude shelters the prisoners of war erected in the prisoner of war camp on St Helena, where he was sent as prisoner of war during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Even though these structures were not erected on South African soil, they reflected the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Boers who were imprisoned.

Erich Mayer se voorstelling van die volkshut en veelvuldige hutboutradisie

Erich Mayer word nie as een van Suid-Afrika se bekendste en belangrikste kunstenaars gereken nie. Nogtans het hy 'n magdom sketse en waterverftekening nagelaat wat vir die historikus en kultuurhistorikus van onskatbare waarde is. Sy werk is tot nog toe ook nie deur argitektuurhistorici wat in Suid-Afrika se inheemse volksargitektuur belangstel, ontgin nie. Mayer het as landmeter verskeie streke van Suid-Afrika deurkruis en sketse van eenvoudige plaasopstalle en ander strukture gemaak. Die meeste van die geboue bestaan nie meer nie en is die tekening die enigste bewys van volksboukunsstipes waarvan net in volksvertellings vertel en met behulp van mondelinge oorlewering vorm gegee is. Die geboue wissel van eenvoudige grasmat koepelhutte van die Noordweste, kapsteilhuse in Namakwaland, tot eenvoudige Bosveldhuse. Hy het ook 'n besondere bydrae gelewer tot die optekening van die skuilings wat die Boere vir hulleself in die krygsgevangene kamp op St Helena opgerig het. Alhoewel die skuilings nie op Suid-Afrikaanse bodem opgerig was nie, was dit wel met boere-vindingrykheid en handvaardigheid gedoen.

Introduction

This paper is based on six drawings in the large collection of Erich Mayer drawings, paintings and watercolours belonging to the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria. Mayer's works are located all over South Africa and Namibia. Collections are also located at the Pretoria Art Museum, MuseumAfrica in Johannesburg, museums in Kimberley and Bloemfontein and several private collections. This paper introduces some of his drawings depicting buildings and structures of particular (but unknown) farmsteads; one located in the northern part of South Africa just referred to as *Huis agter die Soutpansberg* - dwelling behind the Soutpansberg. The second farmstead is

located in Namaqualand, in the western part of the former Cape Province.

Mayer's contribution to art in South Africa lies particularly with his introduction of original art to the residents of towns in the countryside. His subjects related to the landscape, the rural social context and old Boer families, which he depicted with a keen eye for detail and landscape elements. The hut and multiple hut building tradition reinforces the notion that during the first years of settlement in the interior of South Africa, the pioneers did not erect impressive dwellings, but preferred to construct shelters that were small and simple. They consisted of a single room and had square or circular floor plans. Two traditions occurred: a number of huts erected separately on the

same site and secondly the clustering of huts, linked together with small passages in between.

These drawings confirm and illustrate the two types of multiple hut traditions that became synonymous with early vernacular architecture on farms of Boer families that practised subsistence farming in the interior of South Africa.

Background for referring to the drawings of Erich Mayer

The National Cultural History Museum (Pretoria) owns 780 drawings and watercolour paintings of Erich Mayer. On 27 January 2001 an additional 70 drawings were added to the collection when *Die Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* donated their entire collection of Erich Mayer drawings to the Museum. Most of the drawings in the latter collection depicted Boer individuals and only two had buildings in the background. The portrait studies will remain what they are, merely portrait studies and are of little value for the museologist or historian interested in the way people lived in the past. The portrait studies may have some value for the cultural historian and museologist interested in traditional clothing and in some cases handmade folk furniture.

The collection of drawings and paintings depicting landscapes with buildings or buildings and structures, have not been described or analysed by the resident specialists in the Museum. This is a first attempt to introduce those drawings where vernacular buildings were depicted either as a single object in the drawing, or as background to figures or camping scenes.¹ It is the biggest collection of drawings of rural vernacular buildings in the Museum and has the potential to fill an entire book or at least a museum catalogue.

The Mayer drawings cover an era (early 20th century) of which very little is known and almost no record exists of especially the rural vernacular architecture of the country. As land surveyor, Mayer had

the opportunity to visit isolated regions and farms and his recordings are extremely valuable. The lack of visual evidence of vernacular architecture makes it difficult to evaluate and reconstruct the history of early building types and building technology in the country.

The single gabled thatched roof homestead is considered to be the only shape the early homesteads had and has become a stereotype when reference is made to early pioneer dwellings. These drawings introduce another angle to the vernacular building tradition of those early years. Perhaps they may clear some of the misconceptions about early Boer dwellings.

Erich Mayer

Erich Mayer was born on 19 April 1876 in Karlsruhe, Germany. After his tertiary education, he studied architecture in Charlottenburg until 1896 when he had to stop his training due to bad health. His medical doctor advised him to come to South Africa.²

Mayer arrived in South Africa in 1898. By February 1899 he recuperated to such an extent that he took the post of assistant land surveyor in the small town of Vrede in the Orange Free State allowing him to travel into the rural areas of the province. It was inevitable that he would come in close contact with the Boers and rural people of the region. He was a volunteer during the Anglo-Boer War and was captured at Mafikeng in May 1900, and sent as prisoner of war to the island of St Helena for two and a half years. Once again he had all the time in the world to relate to the Boers whom were captured with him. Here he became friends with Col. A. Schiel and agreed to do all the drawings for Schiel's book *23 Jahre sturm und sonneschein in Sudafrika*.³ He was sent to Tunis via London with the French prisoners of war who fought with the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War. He arrived back in Germany in May 1903 and started taking drawing-lessons. In October

1904 he was back in South Africa, once again because of his bad health.⁴

This time he was only allowed into Namibia, then a German colony. Here he had the opportunity to focus on landscape painting. The *Zwakopmunder Buchhandlung* asked him to do a series of maps (drawings) of Windhoek resulting in Mayer's interest and focus on drawing afterwards. He travelled through Namibia recording people and places as far as he went. He returned to Karlsruhe in 1907 where he continued his studies in painting and from 1909 to 1911 he also studied painting and drawing in Stuttgart. In 1911 he returned to South Africa, settling in Port Elizabeth first, then in Potchefstroom and eventually in Pretoria. In 1914 he held his first one-man exhibition in Johannesburg. During the First World War he was interned in Pietermaritzburg and could only continue painting in 1919.⁵

In 1920 J.F.W. Grosskopff (professor of Economics, University of Stellenbosch)⁶ persuaded Mayer to organise a one-man exhibition in Stellenbosch. After his exhibition in Stellenbosch he held several exhibitions all over South Africa. In 1928 he got married to Margaretha Gutter and the Mayer's travelled for three years through Namibia, eventually settling in Pretoria where his wife started a weaving enterprise for which Mayer did some designs.⁷

The vernacular hut and multiple hut tradition

Fieldwork in rural Transvaal has revealed a particular phenomenon: the occurrence of small square and circular huts on old farmsteads. Individual huts were often erected separately and connected later with passages and linking rooms, almost as if the individual buildings were erected only when the need occurred - on an ad hoc basis. The need seems to have been for a single room "hut" instead of a proper dwelling with more than one room or several rooms that would cater for several needs and then arranged under a single roof.⁸ This building tradition

is completely contrary to popular perceptions of South African vernacular architecture as published in the past thirty years. The hut and multiple hut tradition may have been a temporary phenomenon, but fieldwork has revealed that these huts eventually became permanent dwellings and in some cases large farm houses.

The most publicised vernacular architecture tradition in South Africa is the Cape Dutch tradition. The dwellings associated with the Cape Dutch building tradition are known for their "grandness". Contrary to this tradition are the dwellings of the cattle and stock farmers that lived in and explored the interior of the country. The grand Boer dwellings that were erected later are also well known and so are the Victorian dwellings that existed in the Transvaal prior to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Somewhere between the mobile trekboer's camp and the settled pioneers dwellings, another type of building existed. A type that may probably help us to understand and define the character of the later building traditions. Close scrutiny of this tradition may perhaps assist in explaining the logic and character of the later Boer dwellings (and Boer farmsteads).

To the pioneers, mobility was more important than the ability to remain in one location. Whenever they decided to settle, no permanent dwelling was erected and the family had to live in small structures that may not even qualify as being called "dwellings" or "houses". The simplest way to describe these structures would be to call them "huts". The most adequate description of a "hut" may be a dictionary description. The Oxford English Dictionary⁹ defines a "hut" as "a small simple or crude house or shelter..." or .. "a temporary wooden, etc, house for troops".

Three basic floor plans (shapes) occur in the Mayer drawings: rectangular, square and circular. Traditionally only the rectangular type was highlighted - probably because it related to the perception we have of a dwelling, cottage and house and

academic felt comfortable with such a civilised floor plan. The square and circular-shaped floor plans have received little attention. These are the typical “huts”.

The origin of the hut and multiple hut tradition probably dates to the times when living in a wagon and camping were more common than living as a settled pioneer or subsistence farmer in a rectangular dwelling. For the nomadic and semi-nomadic stock cum cattle farmer cum hunter, his wagon was his only real “private space” - except for his tent. The tent and wagon can thus be considered as the first “huts”. When camping, the wagon remained the core of the camp with additional shelters erected next to the wagon or some distance away. On a micro scale the wagon operated as a core and most private part of the camp. When the camp was stacked away, everything went into the wagon - the wagon remained a consistent and constant shelter. When a new camp was erected, the accompanying tents were erected in the vicinity of the wagon and the configuration may have been altered according to the site or the likes of the head of the operation (father or hunter).

The camp consisted of a core surrounded by the other activity areas. Some of these areas were defined by roofs, lean-tos and tents. Sometimes a cattle kraal was constructed with branches. Most of the activity areas were not that well defined but existed nevertheless, such as the campfire and cooking areas. Even though the different activity areas were not defined by structures or physical objects, they were there. They existed in the mental map of the person or persons responsible for making the decision on the location of activities around the house.

As soon as the first more permanent buildings were erected, other structures were also erected, such as an outdoor oven, a cattle kraal and sometimes a crude shelter to protect the wagon. (One of the few buildings that were erected and do not qualify under the definition of a “hut” was the “waenhuis”.

These shelters were large in scale and most of the time larger than the dwelling). The open fire was closed with a screen made from reeds and later became an outdoor kitchen. The first structure, dwelling or sleeping hut, independent of the wagon, marks the first step in the evolution towards settlement and “to dwell”. These shelters can be referred to as “huts”. They may differ in shape from circular to rectangular and consist of a timber frame. The spaces between the frame members were filled with horizontal and vertical laths or reeds. These huts may have an A-frame or may be a rondavel. The universal feature is that they consisted of a single and sometimes a second room. This shelter was only used for sleeping and for storing private movable objects. Any other activity such as cooking and safekeeping of animals and workers were located around the central core hut.

Rondavels are part of this hut and multiple hut tradition that have become common on the farms in the Transvaal and elsewhere in South Africa as demonstrated in the two sets of drawings of Mayer.¹⁰

The final endorsement of permanence is when the first hut is extended by new additions to its side or by connecting other nearby huts (sometimes rondavels) with each other forming a cluster and at the same time a new vernacular dwelling tradition. This phase can also be identified by the construction of a new dwelling - this time a rectangular structure with several rooms under a single roof.

Dwellings, cooking screens and outdoor kitchens

Certainly the most well known of all vernacular shelters associated with Namaqualand is the beehive-shaped huts constructed by both the Khoi people and the white settlers who later entered the region. Mayer made a number of pencil drawings of these beehive huts used by the white settlers.



Figure 1

Beehive type hut still used by white farmers in Namaqualand during the first quarter of the 20th century and depicted by Mayer. It remained a shelter against the sun during the day but at night became a “dwelling”. (Original drawing and photograph: National Cultural History Museum).

On one of these drawings (Figure 1), the interior of the hut is clearly depicted and it also gives an indication of the size of the hut. Three adults are seated on chairs inside the hut. Contrary to the belief that these grass mat shelters were so small that they could only be used for sleeping, this drawing gives an indication that it was big enough to house two beds, a table, dressing table and a chair with enough room to move between the furniture. Instead of having a small door or an entrance of standard modern day measures, this hut has a large “door” covered with a grass mat. To leave the door open the mat was simply rolled-up and tied to the frame at the top of the entrance. At night it was lowered. The entrance was not high enough to allow an adult to enter without bending slightly. The drawing gives no indication whether the floor was lifted above the ground surface, or whether the floor surface was decorated with cattle dung or not.

In the early years of the Transvaal’s existence, the white farmers or pioneers who moved into the region seldom constructed a kitchen as part of the dwelling.¹¹ Coming from a nomadic existence they were used to preparing their food on an open fire. Settling on a farm first asked for protection of the family at night. Food was still prepared

outdoors.¹²

In Namaqualand this tradition extended well into the 20th century. This was partly due to the weather as it is hot during the day and seldom rains. The residents needed little protection against the rain while preparing their food. Mayer made a number of drawings of cooking shelters (“kookskerms”) used in Namaqualand depicting the variety in size, building materials and movables that were used inside. In its most primitive form the cooking shelter consisted of a circle of stacked brushes cut from the indigenous vegetation, growing around the house. Some were merely stacked while others were tied to timber supports. Other screens were more sophisticated.

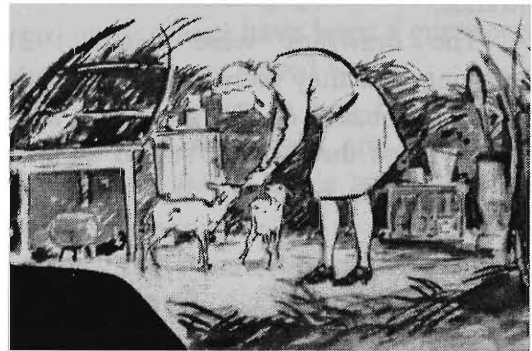


Figure 2

Cooking shelter, cooking screen or outdoor kitchen in Namaqualand. It consisted of a circular structure with no real walls and without a roof. It became a permanent additional “room” to the dwelling and was even furnished (Original drawing and photo: National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria).

All cooking shelters are open at the one end and seldom had a roof.¹³ One of Mayer’s drawings gives an indication of what such a cooking shelter looked like (Fig. 2). A woman is feeding two lambs inside the shelter. The shelter has a timber frame, which was bent inwards like the bottom part of a beehive hut, but without a roof. Branches were stacked against the timber frame. Interesting to note is the furniture inside, indicating the permanence of this open “hut” and the use of it as an additional room, but separate from the dwelling.

The Namaqualand farmstead

The region differs completely from the Soutpansberg region where the other farmstead (mentioned in this paper) is located. This farmstead is located in Namaqualand or the region commonly known as the North West (*Noordweste*). The region¹⁴ is known for its scarcity of natural resources, including scarce building materials. Stone is commonly used for building, and corbelled dwellings (*korbeelhuise*) are common. They are constructed with layer upon layer of flat stone slabs that taper towards the top in such a way that the roof is an extension of the walls. These buildings were circular in shape with a single or no windows and a single entrance.

The drawings were dated 1921, signifying that they were drawn the same year and probably on the same day while Mayer visited the farm or stayed with the farmer and his wife. All three buildings would qualify as typical pioneer structures and prove that the different types were still used well into the 20th century and were not only unique to the 19th century. They may have been erected before 1900 and remained in use beyond the turn of the century.

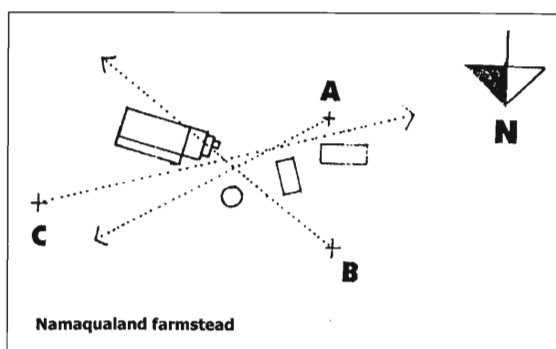


Figure 3

Reconstruction of the Namaqualand farmstead, indicating the configuration of the various buildings. The various vantage points of the artist are indicated by points A, B and C (Drawing: M Naudé).

The main features depicted on the

Mayer drawings are three buildings, located on the same farmstead (Figure. 3). The most significant is a gabled building, supposedly the main house. The other two buildings are domed and A-frame structures. The farmstead reflects the expansion of the farmstead as an adaptation by the owners by erecting several types of structures on the same site. One assumes that each building of this pioneer had a particular reason for its existence but was erected independently and separate from another. It is also assumed that each structure was erected while the others kept their function and remained in use.

The main building or dwelling seems to feature most prominently while the other structures tend to be obscured, suggesting that they were outbuildings and of lesser importance to both the artist and the owner. They merely played a supportive role to the home.



Figure 4

Southern elevation of the dwelling with the kitchen added to the gable-end (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria).

True to vernacular building tradition, the dwelling consists of a core with additions added to the gable-end of the original (Figure 4). The original building is well defined by its shape and roof profile. The core building consists of a thatched "wolwe-ent" roof - a roof type more common in the Cape than north of the Vaal River. Another room with the characteristics of a kitchen was added to the gable-end. It is defined by a flat roof with a chimney and

hearth on one side. The pitched thatched roof of the original house was not extended to accommodate the kitchen. Instead the kitchen roof is of corrugated iron and kept in position with large stones on top. The hearth includes a baking oven that protrudes outwards while opening towards the inside. One of the outbuildings is a typical “kapsteil” building with a rectangular floor plan and without walls (Figure 5).



Figure 5

Western elevation of the dwelling with the kapsteil structure at the right and dome-shaped structure at the left. The kapsteil structure is thatched and the entrance is covered with several planks and sheet iron (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria).

The roof merely extends from the top to the ground in an A-frame. It has no windows but a single entrance in one of the gable-ends. It was possibly used for storage as the entrance is merely covered with what seems to be pieces of sheet iron with no formal hinged door. It is assumed that the entire structure had a timber frame, which was then covered with thatch.

The third outbuilding resembles the shape of a rondavel with the roof profile of a corbel dwelling (Figure 6). None of the drawings clearly indicate how it was constructed and it is difficult to determine what it was used for. If the dwelling had no hearth it could have been a covered cooking screen or outdoor kitchen. Grass mats were placed against the lower parts of the walls in the same way mats were used to cover the domed mat structures known to be used in

the region.

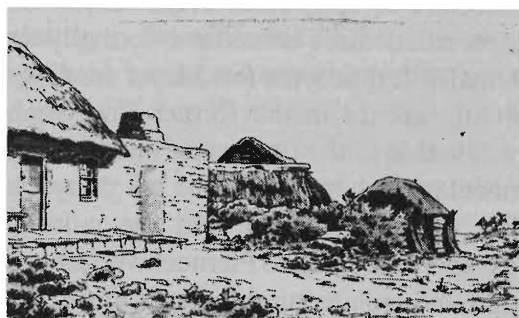


Figure 6

Northern elevation of the dwelling with the kitchen on the gable-end. Three outbuildings are located west of the dwelling, defining a “werf”. A fourth building is located in the back, which has not been described. (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum).

A fourth building appears in one of the drawings and may have been a guestroom (hut) where Mayer stayed over.

It does not appear in any of the other drawings and no details are identifiable except that it had a gable and a thatched roof.

Homestead behind the Soutpansberg

The area commonly known as the Bushveld stretches from the southern boundaries of the North West Province right up to the Limpopo valley in Limpopo Province. Originally, it formed the most western and northern boundary of the former province of the Transvaal. Only a few drawings of buildings in the old Transvaal exist in the collection of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria. This does not imply that these are the only drawings he made while travelling in this vicinity, as MuseumAfrica in Johannesburg, the Pretoria Art Museum and many private owners also have Mayer’s as part of their collections.¹⁵ The collections at these centres have not been investigated and may contain even more rare examples of the “hut” tradition introduced here.

Little is known about the vernacular architecture of early rural Transvaal, as no one recorded these structures formally or informally. It makes the few Mayer drawings depicting scenes in the former Transvaal, very valuable to the researcher interested in vernacular architecture. Due to Mayer's ability to record nature and the cultural landscape, compared to Pierneef who altered natural and architectural features to suit his personal sense for artistic expression and mathematical composition, Mayer preferred to depict the landscape, people and buildings with their inconsistencies, irregularities in shape and form. This quality adds more value to the Mayer drawings.

In general, the side elevation profile of the typical Transvaal farmhouse before and after the Anglo-Boer War, consisted of a small dwelling forming the core, with a well-defined gable and lean-tos along both the front and back facades. The Mayer drawings depict something different and unique. In this case the farmyard depicts two buildings, the one a rondavel and the other a "conglomerate" consisting of several smaller units: two separate square huts with pyramid shaped roofs connected by a space covered with a flat roof. One question remains: which came first the square huts or the flat roof structure.



Figure 7
Front and side elevation of the Soutpansberg dwelling facing south. Note the wooden shutter sealing the window. (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum).

Three drawings of a farmstead described by Mayer as being north of the Soutpansberg (Limpopo Province) dated 1929, are exceptional and rare (Figure 7).

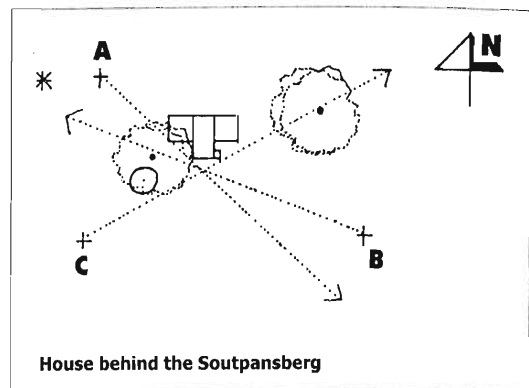


Figure 8
Reconstruction of the Soutpansberg farmstead indicating the location of the different buildings. The various vantage points of the artist are indicated by points A, B and C (Drawing: M Naudé).

Originally, they were interpreted as depictions of three separate farmsteads in that region, but closer scrutiny revealed they were of the same farmstead but drawn from different angles (Figure 8). The drawings depict the farmstead from three sides and indicate what the dwelling, surrounding outbuildings and "werf" looked like. The main feature in these drawings is the farmhouse of a white farmer.

A simple map was reconstructed from Mayer's drawings indicating the various vantage points Mayer used to record this homestead.¹⁶ It is surrounded by other "werf" features such as a wind pump and a single rondavel. Otherwise, the "werf" is empty with no visible manmade features such as gardens, fences, cooking screens or an outdoor bake oven. A rope, wire or timber pole set between the branches of a nearby tree suggests a washing line or the place where fresh cut meat was dried.

In the history of early white vernacular architecture, several common dwelling types have been identified. Three of them appear in these drawings: square, rectangular and rondavel - two of them in a particular

configuration. The homestead has a T-shape floor plan with a kitchen forming the leg of the -T.

A unique feature of the dwelling is its orientation towards the south. Homesteads north of the Vaal River tend to face east, northeast or south.¹⁷ Recent field research done by the National Cultural History Museum and the Department of Architecture of the Pretoria Technikon, has revealed that the orientation of early farmhouses was not necessarily selected according to logic of cosmology, but according to sociological preferences such as a view from the front veranda towards the nearest road. According to the shade it seems as if the main entrance faces south leaving the front door in the shade for most of the day and the front facade and public entrance on the more comfortable cooler side. The kitchen, back entrance and backyard face north which is exceptional for early pioneer homesteads and completely the opposite of the Hartbeestpoort (east of Pretoria) dwelling that predates this homestead (1838). The notion has always been that the kitchen and cooking activities would be located at the southern and cooler side of the dwelling, due to the complete lack of cooling facilities for keeping food fresh at the time. The only shade at the backdoor was created by the corrugated iron back veranda and the tall tree between the rondavel and main house.

The small protruding room with its chimney stacked to the one side, is interpreted as being a kitchen with a hearth that was operated from inside the dwelling. The kitchen looks like a lean-to addition with its roof merely an extension of the flat roof of the core building.

One of the best known dwelling types in early Transvaal was the rondavel or cone on cylinder type of dwelling also commonly referred to as a "hut" (Figures 9&10). Traditionally it was associated with black African settlement and architecture. In these drawings, the rondavel appears at the back of the farmhouse as an independent building but located so close to the main

house that it must have been used by the residents as an additional space and facility relating to the activities of the residents. It may have been used as a storeroom, a guest room or a boys' room (a room for the landowner's sons who were old enough to look after the cattle and had to take part in



Figure 9

Back and side elevation of the Soutpansberg dwelling indicating the position of the kitchen and fireplace on the northern side. (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum).

managing the farm and farming activities). The location of the rondavel in relation to the main house suggests that the rondavel had become "vernacularized" and had been incorporated into the vocabulary of buildings erected and used by the white farmer. Field research in the Transvaal has revealed that the rondavel has become part of the white vernacular architecture, especially on farmsteads.¹⁸

It is uncertain which part of the house was first as the sequence of construction cannot be clearly deduced from the drawing. The main house on the farmstead is unique. It has never been recorded that a flat roof dwelling has been enlarged by adding two square rondavel type buildings or rooms, one on each side of the core building. By itself the flat roof building is unexpected and unique in this part of the country. This dwelling could have had a saline roof or *brakdak*¹⁹ or a corrugated iron roof. The *brakdak* is associated with drier parts of the country where the soil roof will remain intact for many years due to the dry weather

and low annual rainfall.²⁰ If a flat roof building had to be extended sideways, the norm would have been to extend the facades and use the same flat roof construction, retaining the slope of the original or core building. In this case the original building was extended by adding two new “huts” with pyramid shaped roofs, both thatched.



Figure 10

View on the Soutpansberg farmstead from behind the rondavel (Photograph: National Cultural History Museum).

The only alternative explanation for this configuration of spaces and roof types, is the possibility that the flat roofed dwelling was a connecting space between the two square huts. The second explanation for this configuration would be to assume that the two square huts with thatched roofs were erected first and later connected with the flat roof section in between, another common way of clustering separate spaces.

The drawings also supply the architectural historian with some data regarding building technology at the time. Of special interest is the position of the small windows directly under the eaves, probably because of the heat during the day and exploiting the almost permanent shade created under the eaves throughout the day. None of the windows have frames filled with glass panes. Wooden shutters were used to close the square “holes” (windows) when it was necessary. These were probably kept in position with homemade hinges. One shutter was held in position with (what seems to be)

a timber pole set diagonally against it. The veranda at the back of the house consisted of timber posts supporting a corrugated iron roof. The back stoep seemed to consist only of a hardened surface, the floor at the same level as the surrounding yard which was probably kept clean by brushing away leaves and chicken dung each day with a grass broom made by the African maid.

Huts in the prisoner of war camps

Another “hut” tradition that was recorded by Mayer is the shelters erected by the prisoners of war during the Anglo-Boer War. The shacks of the prisoners of war erected in the prisoner of war camps during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) must be included in the typology of South African vernacular architecture even though they weren’t on South African soil.

They were constructed by the Boers who were imprisoned on the different islands (Ceylon - now Sri Lanka, Bermuda and St Helena) and on the mainland of India after being captured by British troops in South Africa. The important contribution of these shelters cum dwellings lies in their innovative construction and the use of available (waste) material in the various camps.

Erich Mayer made a series of drawings depicting some of the shelters and dwellings the Boers constructed from timber, hessian, canvas, flattened tin cans and rope. They had square and rectangular floor plans with low timber frame gables. These structures were completely supported by timber frames and covered with hessian, canvas and some with tin cans that have been cut open, flattened and nailed to the timber frames. Some of these dwellings were small (about 2,5m by 2,5m) and could only accommodate a bed and table.²¹

Mayer lived in Deadwood Camp and it is possible that if all his drawings made of the camp could be brought together in a single collection, details of the camp layout and the shelters erected by the prisoners of

war could be reconstructed like the farmstead north of the Soutpansberg.

This tradition did not have an impact on the vernacular architecture in South Africa, but is worth mentioning as it demonstrates the innovative thinking and ingenuity of prisoners of war who had to cope with the harsh conditions combined with little variety of materials to choose from.²² They created their own “squatter” tradition, which has never been mentioned in any book published on the history of vernacular architecture. It also confirms the existence of another type of “hut” that was erected - based on the basic needs of individuals, rather than a group or family.

Conclusion

Vernacular architecture cannot be isolated from its natural environment and social context. When interpreting the drawings of Mayer, dating back to the first half of the 20th century, it is difficult to reconstruct the social environment and background of the people and places he depicted. It is only the artist's fine and sharp recording eye that suggests details linking the social and local environment of the topic he recorded at the time. For historical reconstruction purposes Mayer's drawings are, although small in scale, filled with cultural historical data and needs to be exploited. Essays based on small pockets of unexplored information such as drawings, old photographs and the enormous bulk of untapped oral information regarding old buildings, structures, building techniques and the utilisation of natural materials, are the only way in which the past of vernacular architecture can be exposed.

The phenomenon of various building traditions on one farmstead neither occurred exclusively in the Namaqualand nor in the Transvaal. They occurred in both regions. Whether the patterns observed on the two farms can be used to determine that it was the rule of thumb or merely an exception, still has to be proved with more research (particularly fieldwork) in these regions.

What makes these examples unique, is the suggestion that prior to living in proper “dwellings” or “houses”, the pioneers lived in “huts” or small single or two-roomed spaces that really only protected their most intimate belongings and offered privacy for sleeping and none for living indoors. These buildings were stripped of all pomp or extravagance reflecting the pioneer settler and temporary settler's real needs for shelter and protection.

We should not attempt to interpret the vernacular building traditions of the semi-nomadic and first phase pioneer settler from a modern perspective - that these individuals had a vision of a large dwelling or “house” and that they pursued this vision as soon as they settled on a piece of land. In many instances it is clear that building a “house” with many rooms serving all or at least the bulk of the needs of the family at once was not a priority. Needs were served as they arose, depending on the approval of the father or patriarch of the house.

What can be further deducted from the above observations is that to the pioneer settlers, “open space” was more important than “closed space”. Distance between activities and closed spaces were more important than clustering and the economic linking of spaces. These spatial concepts lie at the heart of the early vernacular architecture in rural Transvaal.

Notes

- 1 Naudé, M. 2000. Erich Mayer's Soutpansberg triptych. *Year Book 17*. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria.
- 2 Van der Westhuizen, H. M. 1969. Erich Mayer. *Ons Kuns 1*. Cape Town: Cape and Transvaal Printers, p. 91.
- 3 Schiel, A. 1920. *23 Jahre Sturm und Sonnenschein in Sudafrica*. Leipzig.
- 4 Van der Westhuizen, H. M. 1969. Erich Mayer. *Ons Kuns 1*. Cape Town: Cape Town and Transvaal Printers, p. 91.

- 5 Van der Westhuizen, H.M. 1969. Erich Mayer. *Ons Kuns* 1. Cape Town: Cape and Transvaal Printers, p. 91.
- Bouwman, A. C. 1953. Erich Mayer. *Kuns in Suid Afrika*. Pretoria: HAUM, p. 56.
- 6 *Dictionary of South African biography*. (Vol. V.), p. 348.
- 7 Nilant, F.G. E. 1977. Erich Mayer. *South African Biographical Dictionary*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, p. 604.
- 8 Fieldwork done by the author in the former Transvaal between 1985-1988 revealed the occurrence of hut-type buildings on farms. The common occurrence of this tradition has never been published and perhaps has been negated as it may have been considered to be "non-architecture".
- 9 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (ninth edition) 1995, p. 665.
- 10 Naudé, M. 1998. Rondavels and rondavel houses on farmsteads in the Transvaal. *Year Book* 12. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria, p. 24.
- 11 Naudé, M. 1998. Oral evidence of buildings and structures on farmsteads in the Waterberg (Northern Province). *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, Vol. 7, Pretoria, p. 63.
- 12 Naudé, M. 2000. Erich Mayer's Soutpansberg triptych. *Year Book* 17. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria.
- 13 Van der Waal-Braaksma, G. and Ferreira, O.J.O. 1986. *Die Noordweste, die stoflike kultuuruitinge van die streek se bewoners*. Johannesburg: Perskor.
- 14 Van der Waal-Braaksma, G. and Ferreira, O. J. O. 1986. *Die Noordweste, die stoflike kultuuruitinge van die streek se bewoners*. Johannesburg: Perskor.
- 15 Naudé, M. 2000. Erich Mayer's Soutpansberg triptych. *Year Book* 17. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria.
- 16 The various vantage points are marked A, B and C on the map.
- 17 Radford, D. 1984. The South African cottage in the 19th century. *Lantern*. Pretoria: Foundation for Science and Technology, p. 47.
- 18 Naudé, M. 1988. Opname van volksboukuns in enkele Transvaalse distrikte. Unpublished report to the Human Sciences Research Council. Pretoria:

National Cultural History Museum.

19 The "brakdak" also occurred in the Waterberg region of the former Transvaal Province. See; Naudé, M. 1998. Oral evidence of vernacular buildings and structures on farmsteads in the Waterberg (Northern Province). *Research by the National Cultural History Museum* 7. Pretoria, pp. 59-62.

20 Van der Waal-Braaksma, G. and Ferreira, O. J. O. 1986. *Die Noordweste, die stoflike kultuuruitinge van die streek se bewoners*. Johannesburg: Perskor, pp. 9-11.

21 Naudé, M. 1999. The construction of homesteads, shelters and other structures of survival associated with the Anglo-Boer War. *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*. Pretoria, 8, pp. 7-10.

22 Naudé, M. 1999. The construction of homesteads, shelters and other structures of survival associated with the Anglo-Boer War. *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 8, Pretoria.

Sources cited

Bouwman, A. C. 1953. Erich Mayer. *Kuns in Suid Afrika*. Pretoria: HAUM.

Dictionary of South African biography. (V.), p. 348.

Naudé, M. 1988. Opname van volksboukuns in enkele Transvaalse distrikte. Unpublished report to the Human Sciences Research Council. Pretoria: National Cultural History Museum.

Naudé, M. 1998. Rondavels and rondavel houses on farmsteads in the Transvaal. *Year Book* 12. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria, p. 24.

Naudé, M.. 1998. Oral evidence of buildings and structures on farmsteads in the Waterberg (Northern Province). *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 7, Pretoria.

Naudé, M. 1999. The construction of homesteads, shelters and other structures of survival associated with the Anglo-Boer

War. *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 8, Pretoria.

Naudé, M. 2000. Erich Mayer's Soutpansberg triptych. *Year Book* 17. Pretoria: Africana Society of Pretoria.

Nilant, F.G. E. 1977. Erich Mayer. *South African Biographical Dictionary*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Radford, D. 1984. The South African cottage in the 19th century. *Lantern*. Pretoria: Foundation for Science and Technology

Schiel, A. 1920. *23 Jahre sturm und sonneschein in Sudafrika*. Leipzig.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (ninth edition) 1995.

Van der Waal-Braaksma, G. and Ferreira, O. J. O. 1986. *Die Noordweste, die stoflike kultuuruitinge van die streek se bewoners*. Johannesburg: Perskor.

Van der Westhuizen, H. M. 1969. Erich Mayer. *Ons Kuns* 1. Cape Town: Cape and Transvaal Printers.