

Gerard Moerdijk - death and memorializing in his architecture for the Afrikaner nationalist project

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The oeuvre of Gerard Moerdijk, as practitioner and self-proclaimed architect to the Afrikaner Nationalist project, used the opportunity of the memorializing of deceased personages taken up in the epic narrative of Afrikaner Nationalism so as to extend his architectural scope and source of patronage. These edifices of the time between the achievement of political independence and attainment of the Republican ideal of Afrikaner Nationalism serve as a source of memory and cause for reflection.

Key words: cenotaph, concentration camp, mausoleum, memorial, monument, ossuary, South African War, Voortrekker

Moerdijk – dood en herdenking in sy argitektuur vir die projek van Afrikaner-nasionalisme

Die oeuvre van Gerard Moerdijk as praktisyn en self-erkende argitek vir die Afrikaner Nasionalistiese projek het van die geleentheid gebruik gemaak wat geskep is deur die gedenking van gestorwe persone wat in die Afrikaner Nasionalisme se epiese bevrydingsverhaal opgeneem is om sy eie argitektoniese omvang en bron van kommissies te bevorder. Hierdie strukture uit die trydvak tussen die behaling van politiese onafhanklikheid en die Republikeinse ideal van Afrikaner Nasionalisme dien as bron vir herinnering en nagedagtenis.

Sleutelwoorde: knekelhuis, konsentrasiekamp, gedenkteken, mausoleum, monument, Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog, Voortrekker, senotaaf

The authors are of the opinion that this contribution needs an introductory autobiographical anecdote. Both as teachers in South African history of architecture and as environment and heritage practitioners in association, they have undertaken numerous field trips, seeking out the back roads and backwaters of South Africa in order to acquaint themselves better with and record the more obscure products of the country's architectural patrimony. Of particular interest are the remotely located memorials to forgotten personages and events, some atop a small koppie or others marking an almost forgotten spot along a less-travelled way-side. Intriguingly, but not unusually, these are often by the hand of GLP Moerdijk (1890-1958).

Background

Roger Fisher has previously, through the auspices of this journal, covered the formative (2003: 28-37) and then mature years (2006: 70-8), (2006: 124-36) of Gerard Moerdijk's career. Moerdijk, almost as self-appointed architect to the Afrikaner Nationalist project, is responsible for a corpus of memorials to dead and fallen and monuments to events and deeds. He was, through his experiences, political persuasions and ideological alliances ideologically allied to these persons and events memorialised.

The twentieth century and death

The twentieth century in South Africa was heralded by the middle phase of the South African War (1899-1902) which saw the switch from field engagement to guerrilla warfare after the fall of Pretoria on 5 June 1900. While it is expected that men will die in warfare, it could not have been predicted that the total number of dead combatants on both sides would be exceeded in number by the death of women and children. These were chiefly Afrikaans speaking rural dwellers of one of the Dutch Protestant Calvinist faiths and of European extraction. Moerdijk himself had been incarcerated as a young boy with his family for almost a year in just such a

camp in Standerton (Vermeulen 1999: 13).¹ The trauma of this episode was to etch deeply into the psyche of both Moerdijk and that people, preparing a path for both the honouring of the dead and memorializing of the event.

Moerdijk subsequently grew up and matured at the tumultuous juncture of Afrikaner Nationalism, with its formalising into a political movement (1915) under Hertzog (James Barry Munnik, 1866-1942) during the time of the Rebellion (1914), and the development of various instruments to foster its cause, particularly the Afrikaner Broederbond², of which Moerdijk becomes a member in 1920 (Vermeulen 1999: 49). This was coupled with a lively Afrikaans language press, which Moerdijk courts and to which he also contributes (Clarke, 2009). In this regard he befriended the older Gustav Preller (1875-1943) whose explicit aim was, through his many tomes on the history of the Afrikaner and his editorship of 'Die Volkstem'.³ His aim was to acquaint his despondent countrymen with their heroic past that, through taking pride in that past, it would engender hope for the future. He saw this past, not as the achievement of Titans, but of the great many small achievements of people "like ourselves" (Du Plessis 1968: 647). It is these people that are commemorated and their deeds that are subject for memorialising.

Moerdijk, memorials and the Afrikaner Nationalist project

As a young qualified architect Moerdijk spent some time on the Rand and briefly dallied with architecture for the moneyed Randlords but he soon met and married the sister, Sylva^{4,5}, of his school- friend, Oswald Pirow (1890-1959).

Under the sway of the Pirows, Moerdijk thereafter takes on the mantle of Afrikaner Nationalism. Vermeulen speculates that he is encouraged by a coterie of young Broederbonders to moves to Pretoria and set up practice on his own account, which he does in 1923. He is quick to realize that death holds opportunity for imbue ment of meaning through using memorializing in service of the Afrikaner Christian Nationalist cause.



Figure 1
Klerksdorp Women's Monument, design presentation (Moerdijk 1921:164).



Figure 2
Talana memorial, Dundee (Clarke 2009).

From his writing it is evident that by 1920 he had already been commissioned to design a memorial for the town Klerksdorp, commemorating the sacrifice of women and children in their

fight for retaining Afrikaner independence. In a public address (using Afrikaans as medium of communication) at the unveiling of this 'Women's Monument' in Klerksdorp (figure 1) titled 'Die nasionale waarde van 'n Gedenkteken'⁶ Moerdijk reminds his audience of a time when architects of Greek nationality were in service the Romans. He has it that the monuments and temples of the Greeks were of greater perfection than those of the Roman Empire. This monument, in his words, draws the public together to commemorate a lost freedom. At the same time he equates the Afrikaner with the cultured Greeks of the Periclean Era. He states that the art of the memorial in the Greek tradition persist in the face of the demise of the great Roman Empire, in drawing a parallel with its fall he hints at a celebration of the demise of the British Empire.

Later the congregation of the Dundee NG Church (1920), one of Moerdijk's favourites by his own hand (in association with Wynand Hendrik Louw (1883-1967)), commissions him to design a memorial (figure 2) to the "burgers wat gesneuwel het in die slag van Talana⁷ (30-Oktober-1899)" a battle site proximate to the town. The brass bas relief bow-headed plaque depicts the battle ground at Talana. Caryatids in traditional Voortrekker dress flanking the niche are taken into the architectural assembly as an architectural device and subjugated to the overall architectural scheme. This early work done in conjunction with Anton van Wouw (1862-1945) is more self-consciously refined and neo-classically informed than examples that will follow, although equally as mannered.

With the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism, events of the past became part of an epic narrative, preordained, imbued with heroic deeds and divine destiny. Moerdijk was by now well positioned to lobby for and be awarded the design of structures commemorating the struggles and deaths of heroes and martyrs of the Afrikaner people.

Many examples exist. The events of the wars of independence from British imperialism (1880-1881 and 1898-1902) are given place of prominence in the epic narrative and memorialized as part thereof.

An early example is Moerdijk's design for the forty-six fallen of one of the early battles of the South African War, the battle of Elandslaagde⁸ (figure 3). These were chiefly members of the volunteer Dutch Corps who fought for the Boers during the South African War of 1899-1902. An obviously close association exists with Moerdijk, whose father, Jan Leenderd Moerdijk⁹ (1867-1947) was a native Dutch citizen who arrived in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) in 1887, brought in under Kruger's¹⁰ scheme for importing educators. This is a simple edifice of rough-hewn ashlar atop a small prominence proximate to the killing fields of the Klip River at Elandslaagde. The memorial was erected through subscription by the citizens of the Netherlands in memory of the volunteer Dutch Corps. During this battle as the Boers retreated the Dragoon Guards and 5th Lancers were ordered into the attack during which many casualties were inflicted on the Boer side (including members of the Dutch Corps). This was the last cavalry charge by the British army in a set piece battle. As an aside the monument has been very recently, and inexplicably, vandalised (Northern Kwa-Zulu Natal Courier: 2010).

However other historical occurrences, such as the death of Commandant Louw Wepener¹¹ (1812-1865) in action against the Basotho, are also drawn into the ambit as part of the Afrikaner Nationalist epic narrative of settlement and freedom. This memorial is at the site of the re-internment of his remains, having once been buried at the summit of Thaba Bosigo by Dr Prosper Lautré (1818-1893) of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society where he fell attempting to assail its flanks (figure 4). His son met Moshweshwe (c.1786-1870) un-armed in 1866 and was taken to the grave (Bosch, 1968: 560 - 65) after which he exhumed the remains of his father and gathered them into a bag and took them back to the family farm 'Constantia' located about

six kilometers outside of Bethulie for reburial (Grobelaar 1968: 873). Here a later monument (undated, but presumed to be of the 1930s and of Moerdijk's design) marks the final resting place as well as those of his comrade-in-arms, marked:

Hier rus die stoflike oorskot van Kommandant Louw Wepener (1812-1865) die onverskrokke held van die tweede Basoetoe-oorlog wat sy lewe gegee het op Thaba Bosigo en sy jeugdige strydmaakker Adam Raubenheimer (1840-1865) wat van Oudshoorn alleen te perd gesnel het om die Vrystaters in hul stryd te help.¹²



Figure 3
Elandslaagte memorial, Ladysmith District
(<http://www.battlefieldsregionguides.co.za/Boer%20War.htm>).



Figure 4
Louw Wepener memorial, Bethulie District
(Clarke: 2008).

A bronze bow-topped bas relief plaque matching the niche containing the life-size bronze bust in front, both sculpted by Coert Steynberg (1905-1982), depicts the assault on Thaba Bosigo with the inscription 'Getrou tot in die dood'¹³. A second cast of the bust is to be found in the town of Wepener in the eastern Free State, erected in 1965, the shoulders and full chest omitted from its casting, the bust mounted on boulders removed from a site at Thaba Bosigo proximate to where Wepener was first buried (Geyser, 1989: 82-3).

A monument in Middelburg, Mpumalanga (figure 5), is similar to the Wepener memorial in its architectural conception but this time to the memory of the men who died during the South African War. It is inscribed:

Voortrekker Eeufees 1838-1938. Ter aandenking aan die gesneuwelde burgers en oudstryders Middelburg tydens die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902. Besoek Voortrekker Ossewa 'Sarel Cilliers' 1 Desember 1938.¹⁴

By way of giving a masculine context, rifles of sculpted granite bracket the constructed stele¹⁵, six to a side, executed by a pupil of Anton van Wouw, Frikkie Kruger (1907-1966). Again the bow-topped engraved black granite plaque bearing the inscription is the reverse of the niche, it in this instance containing the bronze roll-of-honour of the deceased and mounted so as to face the entrance to the Dutch Reformed (NG) Church opposite. His presence at the occasion of its unveiling is reported as being that of the '*volksargitek*' [architect of the people] where he and his wife appeared in traditional Voortrekker attire and both addressed the assembly on matters of Afrikaner pride.¹⁶

When the wife of the legendary hero – this time one who could well be considered a Titan – Christiaan de Wet (1854-1922), Cornelia Magaretha de Wet (nee Kruger, 1856-1936) dies she is laid to rest in the graveyard on the family farm in Dewetsdorp. The 'Volk' ['people', but specifically proud Afrikaners] contribute to a memorial grave of Moerdijk's design with a plaque sculpted in bas relief by Coert Steynberg (figure 6). History tells that fifty or so imprisoned women, wives of Boer men on Commando handed a petition to Mrs De Wet for her signature,

the petition requesting their husbands to lay down their arms. The moment depicted on the grave is when Mrs de Wet with the women watching tears apart the document in scorn saying “Sal ons die Burgers vra om oor te gee? Nee, nooit!” [Will we request the Burgers to admit defeat? No, never!]¹⁷, words recorded on the end of the grave. Architecturally, the grave is of the simplest, a rectangular form of a single coursing of rough-hewn ashlar blocks to create the niches for the bronze panel and inscriptions.



Figure 5
Voortrekker centenary monument,
Middelburg, Mpumalanga. (Clarke: 2008).



Figure 6
Design for a tomb for Mrs Cornelia de Wet as it
appeared in Die Volksblad on 19 November 1936.
(<http://repository.up.ac.za/upspace/bitstream/2263/258/1/MDK0293T>).

A design for a monument by the hand of Moerdijk was unveiled posthumously in 1963 to commemorate the life and death of Antjie (Anna) Scheepers (1806-1878) (Pretorius 1989: 84-5), illustrating Moerdijk’s all-encompassing sway particularly on the architecture of Afrikaner Nationalism (figure 7), even after his own death. Again the grave is relocated from where she had lain buried on the farm of her son ‘Welgevonden’ near Vryburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal. It was rediscovered in 1939 and her remains disinterred to lay beneath the monument of Moerdijk’s design incorporating a roundel sculpted by Laurieka Postma (1903-1987) (Duffey 1993: 50-7), in the grounds of the then Afrikaans High School at Ladybrand, Free State, erected from funds raised mainly by pupils of the then Orange Free State (Van Rensburg 1977: 731). The bronze roundel had already been sculpted and cast under supervision of the artist in 1947 but remained unplaced all those years until a suitable location for it could be found. It depicts an episode from the diary of Louis Tregardt (Trichardt) (1796-1838) in which Antjie Scheepers, Martha Tregardt¹⁸ and Breggie Pretorius¹⁹ (1810-1889) direct the Trekker men-folk - who were in despair of ever traversing what seemed an insurmountable Lebombo Mountain barrier - to the route the women had discovered where the wagons could be taken down the mountain (Pretorius 1989: 85).

By now it is evident that Moerdijk had a particular interest in the power of the built form as edifices for memorialisation. His crowning achievement was to win the commission for the Voortrekker Monument (corner stone laid 1938, unveiled in 1949). This however had been preceded by a design touted by Moerdijk, his idea being that for an ossuary²⁰ for the reinterment of the mortal remains of Piet Retief (1781-1837) and his company.²¹ This first design was in the form of an Egyptianate hypostyle hall-like structure (see figure 8).

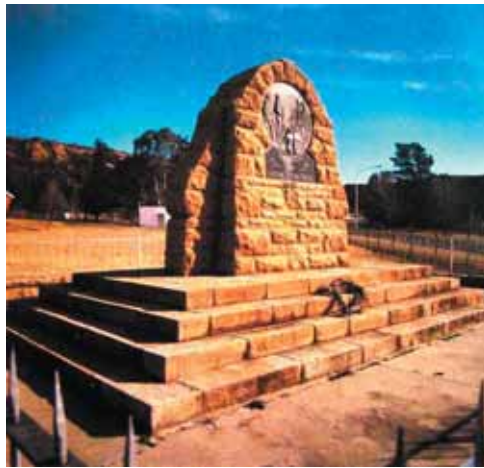


Figure 7
Antjie Scheepers re-internment grave and memorial. Ladybrand by Gerard Moerdijk, 1963 (posthumous). Medallion by Lourika Postma, 1947. (Swart 1989:85).

This proposal to relocate the remains caused public outcry and heated debate and led to the conception of the monument being reconsidered as cenotaph²² (Ferreira 2009), Moerdijk then proposing a monument along the lines of the Mausoleum²³ at Halicarnassus.²⁴

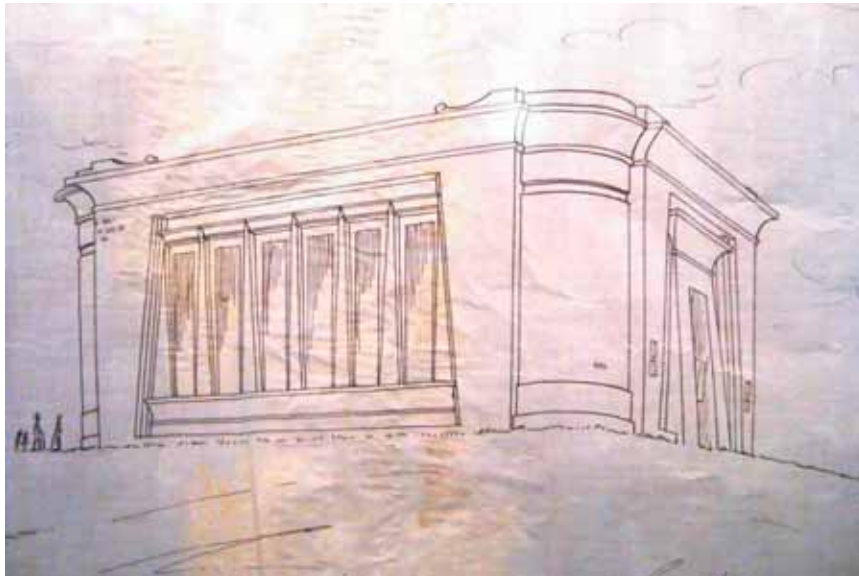


Figure 8
Moerdijk [c.1936?]. Untitled drawing. [Photograph of a drawing in the Moerdijk family collection] (Clarke 2008).

Reflections on Moerdijk's architectural expression in his memorials

In reflecting on the architecture of Moerdijk's the memorials it is evident that, as he engages the subject of memorials over time he strips the classicizing influences of the Academy, particularly that of the Architectural Association where he had been taught, until left with the mere rudiments of architecture. If we examine his first monument to the Women and Children of the concentration camps in Klerksdorp, it is just the rusticated base that remains in later designs. In his reflecting on the role of the Greeks *vis-a-vis* the Romans Moerdijk, as a reader of the draft of this essay has noted, is making a somewhat disingenuous comparison, particularly considering his receiving his architectural education at the AA, as well as having visited the Academy in Paris and British School at Rome. The pioneer Afrikaner settlers had not yet developed a tradition of monumental

built form, a lacuna Moerdijk vigorously pursued and chose to fill. Yet if the Afrikaans culture was to become to the British Empire what the Greeks were to the Romans, it is in the expression through an entirely different aesthetic – that of a rustic and rough-hewn earthiness in contrast to the effete lack of vigour of a classical revivalism of the Empire.

The Louw Wepener monument becomes the architectural formula as type for similar monuments and memorials by Moerdijk. A simple three-stepped stereobate is surmounted by a constructed stele on the stylobate, all of rough hewn coursed ashlar, an arched niche beneath a mannered keystone arch with a matching plaque at the reverse.

With these monuments Moerdijk makes his mark as architect and designer supreme in the service of Afrikaner Nationalism. These memorials, generally of rough-hewn coursed ashlar constructed of local stone in an a-stylistic, somewhat mannered although unaffected aesthetic, as if to relate them to the people they commemorate and memorialize – who Moerdijk would thus have us believe as a simple, honest salt-of-the-earth-like folk. When commemorating the lives of women there is no deference to the feminine subject in the architectural expression, probably because of the moments of defiance of women holding their own in a world of men as a common theme.

While Moerdijk developed and articulated a rationale for the use of stone and its symbolism at the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument, the authors are of the opinion that this emerged over time and that all the preceding memorials were experimentations in the stripping away of recognizably Classicizing influences, perhaps distancing himself from the role the Academy had in his architectural education through the auspices of the Architectural Association in London.

There are rarely such episodes of ‘un-architecture’ in the history of the discipline, that of the French Revolutionary style of the eighteenth century, as expressed in South Africa by Louis Michel Thibault (1750-1815)²⁵, with its mannered classicism and reduction of architecture to stereometric form, one of the other rare exceptions.

Postscript

Today theft and wanton destruction of public monuments and private memorials is prevalent, either for reasons of ideology or for material gain. Bronze in the recycling trade has monetary value, although the intrinsic value of what is inscribed or represented is irreplaceable.

With the political demise of its advocates, the Afrikaner Nationalist project and with the consequent change in political dispensation, current insecurities as well as the vandalizing of private property and memorials, these need to be entrusted to the community that they have served and whose memory they mark so as to be put under the protection of those institutions dedicated to their preservation and protection.

Notes

1. The number of recorded civilian deaths at the camp at Standerton is recorded on the register at the Anglo Boer War Museum 1069 names of civilians although the number is believed to be substantially higher (Wessels 2010).
2. Also known as the Broederbond. This ‘secret’ organisation was established in 1918 and membership was by invitation only and limited to men over the age of 25. The organisation

was strongly associated with the rise in Afrikaner nationalism and the National Party, elected to government in 1949. In 1994 the movement reorganised and was re-named the *Afrikanerbond*. It is notable that every prime minister and state president in South Africa from 1948 to the end of Apartheid in 1994 was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond.

3. De (Die) Volkstem first saw the light of day on Friday 8 August 1873 as the first Dutch-Afrikaans daily north of the then Orange (today Gariep) River. It had a turbulent history and was published from Pretoria until 31 October 1949. Thereafter the *Sunday Express* in Johannesburg published it until 31 March 1951.
4. Sylva Henriette Pirow (1896 -1973) (see Vermeulen 1999: 124 -6).
5. Gerard Moerdijk and Sylva Pirow were married in 1918.
6. Later published in *Die Banier* in February 1921: 165.
7. The burgers who fell in the battle of Talana (author's translation).
8. The Battle of Elandsplaagde, one of the first battles of the South Africa War took place on 21 October 1899.
9. Born in Rilland, Zeeland, Netherlands on 15 October 1866, died on 19 March 1947 in Nylstroom district, South Africa (Geni.com).
10. Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (1825-1904).
11. Wepener, Lourens Jacobus (Louw). (Grobbelaar 1968: 872-3).
12. Here lie the mortal remains of Commandant Louw Wepener (1812-1865) the resolute hero of the Second Basotho War who gave his life at Thaba Bosigo and his youthful comrade-in-arms Adam Raubenheimer (1840-1865) who hastened alone from Oudshoorn on horseback to lend assistance to the Free Staters in their battle. (Author's translation).
13. Faithful until death (Author's translation).
14. Voortrekker Centenary Celebrations. To the memory of those burgers that perished and veterans of the Second War of Liberation 1899-1902. Visit of the Voortrekker ox wagon 'Sarel' Cilliers 1 December 1938. (Authors' translation).
15. From the Greek *stèle* the standing stone marking a grave or carrying a memorial inscription, but through its Indo-European root could be construed as a place to stand still or be quiet (see Morris 1969).
16. "Monument moet merk van geskiedenis dra" [UPSpace](http://www.upspace.co.za) s.a.
17. M.C.E. van Schoor (2007: 163) reports however that the words uttered by Mrs De Wet were: "Laat die mans veg en die Engelse skiet dat dit bars" (Let the men fight and the English shoot to their utmost). (Author's translation).
18. Martha Elizabeth Susanna Bouwer (Ploeger, 1968: 802).
19. Gerbrecht Elizabeth Maria (Brechtie) Alberts, born 20 October 1810 in Graaff-Reinet, died Patrolliesfontein, Molteno on 21 October 1889. Was wife of the Voortrekker Leader, Jan P Pretorius jr. She remarried a C.D. Aucamp. (Visagie 2000: 180).
20. A vessel or receptacle for the holding of bones (from the Latin *ussuarium*. See Morris 1969)
21. The Trekker leader Retief and his men were assassinated by the impi of the Zulu king uDingane (Dingaan) (c.1795-1840) on Bamanango Hill on 6 Feb 1838 outside uDingane's capital Ungungundlovu.
22. A monument erected to a dead person whose remains lie elsewhere (from the Greek *kenos* = empty + *taphos* = tomb, literally an empty tomb. See Morris, 1969).
23. A tomb as an edifice or a building housing such tombs (taken from the name of Mausolos, satrap of Caria who died in 535 BCE for whom such a memorial was erected in Halicarnassus. See Morris, 1969).
24. See *Gedenkteken vir Voortrekkers. Moerdyk-ontwerp. Geen finaliteit as nog bereik*. Woensdag 8 April [1936].
25. See Fisher & Holm (1989) for further information on L.M. Thibault.

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