

Inaugural speech & public address: *“Committing architecture – the discrepancy between practice and academia”*

I have given tonight’s presentation a great deal of thought. One possibility would be to share in my own architectural endeavours, but, which, at this stage, I would have to title “work in progress”. Another possibility would be to continue to expose audiences – as I have done at many occasions in the past, both here and abroad – to examples of South African architecture that demonstrate a remarkable, cross-cultural, design synthesis – a special interest of mine and one which, someday, I hope to publish as a book.

Given such a presentation, I would commence by drawing attention to the transmutation of the 17<sup>th</sup> century European precedent, followed by the Ndebele’s unselfconscious transformation of Cape Dutch, to the more self-conscious interpretation of this amalgamated genre by colleague Peter Rich. In so doing, I would demonstrate the cycle of cultural interaction that spans more than three centuries, paradoxically, despite severe political polarization.

I would also reflect on our multi-faceted architectural heritage, which, apart from settler architecture, includes a vast array of indigenous examples, that are increasingly becoming relics of a stigmatized past. Notwithstanding, these examples of vernacular architecture teach us invaluable lessons about place-making, sustainability and enduring beauty, achieved, though, with minimal means.

In particular, I would relish the exuberance displayed via a variety of aesthetic disciplines – whether the crafts, product design, graphic design, or the visual arts – with creative inspiration, in all instances, drawn from our dynamic – albeit somewhat volatile – existence on this unique continent with its diverse spectrum of ethnicity, fauna and flora.

I would make much of our fine, place-responsive modernist tradition, even long before a notion such as “critical regionalism” had appeared in print – a theme which the exhibition, following this presentation, elucidates. I would laud these timeless creations by architects who have acknowledged the influences from abroad, but adapted those canons to our particular circumstances. Although far more experiential than making for enticing visuals, such a responsible South African Modernism – exemplified by architects such as Norman Eaton, Karel Jooste, Gawie Fagan, Barrie Bierman, Hannes Horne, Roelof Uytenbogaardt, to name but a few – signifies a well-considered response to climate and the use of natural building materials. It also innovatively accommodates a predominantly unskilled labour force by incorporating traditional building methods and craft techniques.

I have compiled the visual material over many years and would marvel every time I encounter (usually in the unaccredited, popular press) another profound – and by implication, more recent – example of what I subsequently termed “Afro-pean”. A term, which in my view, relates to work that celebrates our socio-economic and environmental particularities, whilst respecting the integrity of Euro-centric design premises. It is encouraging to note that this particular design approach does not only prevail on the domestic front, but is, of late, finding application in the civic arena: be it the Mpumalanga Government Buildings, the somewhat idiosyncratic Eastern Cape Government Complex on the outskirts of Kimberley, or the brand new Constitutional Court on Constitutional Hill in Johannesburg: incidentally, all three projects commissioned via national competition.

But, perhaps for too long have I created the false impression that we live happily in the democratic, new South Africa either in quaint, eco-friendly, vernacular villages, or in sophisticated urban – even bohemian – abodes, as *nothing* can be further from the truth.

I consequently decided that it is time to speak out and to share my painful realization, that – with far too few exceptions; far too few awards of merit and excellence – current South African architecture is of the worst of its kind. I have, therefore, decided to focus instead on the disturbing discrepancies that exist between practice and academia, and to take a public stand against the proliferation of built work that simply *does not make the grade*.

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In substantiating these accusations, let us, broadly, explore the evolutionary sequence of events that set the stage for latter-day architecture.

Foremost, one has to credit the ancient Greeks for codifying a pragmatic design methodology. Imagine the enthusiasm when the ancient Greek philosophers concluded that they had deciphered the design formula according to which the universe had been constructed. This discovery was of tremendous aesthetic significance as it implied that any man-made artifact – designed strictly according to the mysterious laws of nature – would encapsulate divine, universal beauty. In brief: recreating the gainly, versus the ungainly. The certitude that these numerically-derived systems of proportion exude, dominated – intermittently – the aesthetic debate in the West for centuries.

The next major design challenge originated with the Industrial Revolution, spawning the quest to evolve an architectural language exemplary of the new *Zeitgeist*. By deriving its ideological premises from a socialist idealism, and its creative impetus from the revolutionary developments in the visual arts, the resultant Modern Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted to address the *perceived* needs of modern man and his newly acquired lifestyle.

Armed with the best of intentions – if not *naïveté* – it was fervently believed that the highly abstracted, self-referential, modern design idiom would find wide appeal. Despite the precision of detail and execution, especially in the hands of the Modern Masters – Gerrit Rietveld, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, my personal favourite, Mies van der Rohe and, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright – it is now common knowledge that the enthusiastic global reception of modern architecture – of the International Style, as it became known – was short lived. The modern architects’ disdain for our natural energy sources, their disregard for the historical fabric and their underestimation of popular taste elicited severe criticism during the rebellious 1960’s: a scenario which the incumbent *Post-Modernists* promptly exploited.

By the 1980s – thus, more than 20 years ago – the *stylistic* interpretation of Post-Modernism seemingly dominated the international arena, given a capitalistically-driven global economy, pandering to popular sentiment and nostalgic *kitsch*.

By contrast, the 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in the aesthetic premises of orthodox Modernism, particularly by a contingent of architects repulsed, categorically, by post-modern banality and vulgarity – ironically, yet again, *despite* the Post-Modernists’ initial, and justifiably legitimate, design concerns. The countering criticism leveled at Post-Modern superficiality was largely facilitated by broad-minded French and German politicians, due to the bicentennial celebrations in Paris and the rejuvenation of the unified city of Berlin. In addition to the growing phenomenon of museums as show-cases of experimental architecture, the recent world expositions, hosted at Seville and Hanover, also fostered novel design sensibilities.

Current international explorations include a variety of predominantly *modernist* interpretations. This modern pluralism includes, firstly, an extension of the Modernist’s intrigue with industrialized technology by the somewhat undistracted Late-Modernists. Secondly, the expansion of the formal and spatial repertoire of the modern precedent by the so-called Neo-Moderns as it was never quite brought to fruition, and, thirdly, the exploitation of the structural boundaries of architecture *per se* by the Deconstructivists. Not to mention the most recent “virtuo”-technological antics of the supposedly *Super-Moderns*. On the flip side of the coin, one identifies the revisiting of – or devising anew – an ecologically-sensitive, *regional* Modernism, with the Glen Murcitt’s Australian School and the Arizonian Threesome in the forefront. Albeit highly exploratory, all architectural initiatives committed to responsibly address the much-lamented shortcomings of our *modern* past.

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South Africa, was, and does remain, affected by these semantic fluctuations from abroad, and has since the inception of Modernism responded closely to international trends. The pioneering introduction of the International Style by the Transvaal Group of the early 1930's was of course echoed by Le Corbusier's amazement to find, and I quote, "such youthful conviction ... something so alive in that far away spot in Africa". So taken was Le Corbusier with our so-called Zero Hour initiative that he dedicated the first edition of his *Oeuvre Complete* to Rex Martiensen and his contemporaries.

As South Africa remained relatively unscathed by the ravages of war, we never experienced, to quite the same extent, the indiscriminate application of the modern aesthetic as elsewhere in Europe during its post-war building boom. However, in due course we, too, experienced a loss of faith in the Modern Movement and increasingly pandered to design alternatives propagated from abroad.

Yet, the question immediately arises to what extent the same yardstick could be applied to a developing environment with a distinctly different set of circumstances, as opposed to countries with vast disposable income. But, the counter argument of the extent to which we respond to our local challenges also come into contention.

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#### *1. Socio-economic housing and community facilities*

The harsh reality is that the larger percentage of our population lives in dismal conditions in informal settlements, or in poorly serviced rural areas. And although access to housing is considered a basic human right – entrenched in our constitution and high on government agenda – architects in this country are either reluctant to engage in work of this nature, or are altogether marginalized for a various reasons: some self-serving, some highly political. And yet, our non-interference is endorsed by a caption in a recent *Citizen* urging the powers that be to, and I quote, "Stop building bad RDP housing"! Not to mention the contentious government decision to import *Cuban* architects to assist in this endeavour.

In our defense, South African architects have, for decades, engaged in the provision of acutely needed facilities for previously disenfranchised communities, rectifying – and justifiably so – the neglect of the past. In fact, some of the most meritorious work is done in this field, displaying a far greater degree of design integrity than most public and supposedly commercial work of recent years.

It is, though, perturbing to encounter numerous of these community facilities, which, upon completion, are non-operational or simply vacant. Evidently, it is far easier to procure finance to execute these projects than to make them operational, raising doubt whether financing, *per se*, is the overriding factor in the realization of projects of this nature. But, this is a topic for another occasion.

## 2. *South African inner cities*

Our cities, in turn, leave just as much to be desired, and are of the most ungainly in the world. Perhaps with the exception of the Mother City, our cities centers have become trading enclaves to a virtually exclusive African clientele, exacerbated by the flights to suburbia, following the 1994 elections. Despite the commitment to viable urban renewal strategies with exciting multi-cultural prospects – especially in Durban and Johannesburg – the inner cities of Bloemfontein and Pretoria lag far behind in any *visible* form of rejuvenation.

And even though one could argue that as an intrinsic rural people we do not have an urban culture like many other parts of the world, our public spaces are virtually non-existent or in a sad state of despair. Unkempt landscaping, barbered wire, devil-forked and palisade fences, coupled with banal advertising boards, are the most distinctive features of these user-unfriendly environments.

## 3. *Decentralized and suburban developments*

If limited public money is the inhibiting factor in upgrading or sustaining – our urban centres and public spaces, one cannot help but stand in awe of (if not at the quality of the architecture) the unprecedented development in the *decentralized* areas of our cities.

A number of trends dominate, and pretty much across the country. One pertains to business enterprises that deliberately shy away from previously designated commercial areas by moving into well-established residential enclaves, converting everything into *anything*. These range from clothing stores, veterinary clinics, motor repair shops, butcheries, and I have even encountered a mortuary in a former house. These conversions not only make a mockery of the sound modernist principle of utilitarian response to programme, but raise doubts as to whether we can still design anything remotely extending beyond a domestic scale – beyond a residential appearance – never mind creating a coherent sense of public space.

However, in a short span of time, and given the success of these enterprises, these hotch-potch conversions would make way for more ‘deliberated’ versions. Words escape me when encountering the passé, stylistically questionable, climatically irresponsible (with the endemic all-side-same-side façade treatment), superfluously decorated, clumsily proportioned and down-right ugly buildings by graduates from respected academic institutions. And I hold my breath every time another example of quintessential, contemporary South African architecture is being constructed; is to yet again ‘grace’ prominent urban intersections. The question I keep on asking myself is whether this is truly the best that our once-distinguished profession – so enthused by Le Corbusier – can conceive of.

#### 4. Gated communities and golf estates

But the worst is still to come. With the raping of our well-established and reasonably coherent residential fabric, dating anything from the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the latest domestic trend pertains to the *bourgeois* ghettos on the outskirts of our ever-expanding cities, moving frightfully close to our previously “out-of-sight-out-of-mind” township brethren. These *nouveau riche* estates – sporting in-house recreational facilities, 24 hour security surveillance and romantic names, such as Silver Lakes, Wood Hill and Mooikloof – are proliferating at the speed of light: a tendency that is endorsed by an article in a recent *Sunday Time*, as no fewer than 30 of these “themed” golf estates are planned in the highly bio-sensitive Wilderness area.

If I can still manage to trace the design origins to the dominating presence of American tv culture, the French version is just a little too much to bear, even for my Huguenot sensibilities. In particular, I absolutely fail to comprehend our infatuation with Tuscany – or rather “Tos-Afrikaans”, even “Boere-Spaans”, as some of my friends would have it. Difficult as it is to find academic justification for this alien Italian precedent, if you absolutely have to design in this highly inappropriate, passé genre, then at least consult the dictates of the Roman scholar Vitruvius, and employ the systems of proportion so meticulously formulated by the *authentic* Classicists more two thousand five hundred years ago.

Granted, on the domestic front, every man is king of his castle, and as the developers smugly remind me, the money, ultimately, buys the whiskey. Save for courageous architectural activist, Alan Lipman, the pathologies behind these monstrosities can be debated for many years to come. On the one hand, it signifies an architectural ostentation that makes me as a closet socialist very, very nervous. On the other hand, it could well be a sign of an insecure community, battling to come to terms with its past, its presence and its future on our African continent.

But, to me the most unforgivable is when our few remaining modernist icons are blatantly ignored – are scoffed at – by their neighbouring buildings, executed by designers who really should know better: work, which I as the Head of an architecture and allied design programme, cannot – and will not – condone. Especially, when considering the vast and wonderful spectrum of our Afro-pean heritage that could be explored; that design inspiration – *authentically, intelligently and poetically* – could be drawn from. Never mind the fact that South Africa is home to the most diverse spectrum of biospheres in the world.

This present scenario cannot continue; this insensitivity to our built environment has to stop!

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1.1 As to my former students, my message to my new students is to be cognizant of the international architectural discourse. But, develop your own theoretical position with which to pro-actively address our unique circumstances.

1.2 I caution you, though, to exercise sound technological judgment: flat roofs do have a tendency to leak, and face brick does require less. Moreover, orientation, climatic control and sustainability are not only politically-correct, but are vital design considerations.

1.3 In the same breath, I implore you to exercise, under all circumstances, sound aesthetic judgment. Respect, at all costs, the context – whether the natural or the man-made. Every site – as every project, irrespective of the size or the budget – is indeed sacred. Learn when to exercise noble restraint and when to innovatively explore beyond such parameters. Experience, however, has taught me that, unless executed by a handful of blessed, gifted individuals, few opportunities justify fanciful formal gymnastics.

1.4 Most importantly, recognize that architecture is not a subjective, but a *relative* discipline. A good designer is modest: humbled by the fact that a better – a more appropriate – design solution is always possible – by yourself, as well as by others.

2. To the practitioners in the audience, you are welcome to challenge me on the misfortunes of the profession, on uninformed and visually-illiterate clients, on inhibiting financial restraints and an unskilled labour force. Or, by contrast, on fast-track developments and monthly turn-over. I have been around for long enough to be quite *au fait* with all these counter arguments – a euphemism, with due respect, for *excuses* for highly questionable work. These, sad to say, more often than not spawned by design insecurities, inflated architectural ego and intellectual apathy. I beg you to remain well-informed, stay abreast of the times, and, most importantly, support the initiatives that our professional body and academic institutions so tirelessly organize.

3. To our clients – in particular, the developers, the banks, the insurance companies, the multinationals, even the embassies and the universities – you are ultimately the patrons (and the culprits) of contemporary South African architecture. Do broaden your horizons way beyond your neighbourhood “knock and drops” and popular “House & Garden” or “Home Owner” magazines. Expect nothing less than excellence from your architectural consultants. Though, bear in mind that long-term dividends can outweigh short-term profits; that you, especially, have a responsibility to the built environment at large.

4. To the nemesis of the architecture profession – estate agents: do take note that architecture is considerably more than colourful paint techniques, slippery imported tiles and extravagant bathroom and kitchen fittings; that architecture is not about style, but about a poetic sensibility.

5. To the municipal authorities – whether regarding urban rejuvenation or mere aesthetic discretion: do draw on the expertise existing in this country; expertise that any academic institution such as this one, could, and indeed must, facilitate.

6. To the powers that be: recognize that nepotism has never cultivated architectural excellence. Instead, take a leaf from your counterparts on the European continent and encourage national, even international, design competitions – as is increasingly the case – but for *all* commissions of public significance. Note that these are best facilitated by the South African Institute of Architects and that the success of competitions depends entirely on well-compiled design briefs and transparent assessment procedures by respected scholars of architecture. Remember, though, to publicize the results and exhibit the submissions, not only to inform public opinion, but to *invite* civilian commentary.

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In conclusion, we build way too much and way too irresponsibly in this country, and when compared to Europe and other parts of the world, we are totally under-regulated, especially in the service of the greater good. Unlike the literary and visual arts, we have no critical architectural tradition in this country and are overly sensitive to any form of criticism or public debate. We are quick to cry *crimen iniuria*, threaten with law-suits, or embark on personal vendettas.

In the end, architecture is not a sprint, it is a marathon. And I would be first to admit that to design a building is probably the most arduous and complex tasks of all human endeavour. Consequently, architecture is a vocation that requires perseverance, dedication and utmost commitment. Yet, lest we forget, architecture is a *public* art in the service of others, which *must* reflect our aesthetic discretion in every sphere of creative conduct. I therefore challenge South African architects to rise to the occasion; to restore the profession as the custodians of sound judgment; as the custodians of good taste. I call on the rest of you to assist us in achieving these objectives.

May the penny drop!

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I would like to conclude with the eternal words of the greatest architect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Le Corbusier: “You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces; that is construction. Ingenuity is at work. But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: ‘This is beautiful. [This] is Architecture. Art enters in.’”

May this, once again, become our collective quest. I rest my case. Thank you.



