The role of photography, place and memory in gallery and museum design

Wanda Verster

Department of Architecture: University of the Free State
versterw@ufs.ac.za

The relationship between photography and the way place is interpreted through photographers is discussed, with reference to phenomenological theory, especially the work of Norberg-Schultz. Peter Zumthor's interpretations on memory in terms of architecture are included to establish a link between photography and architecture, especially in terms of memory. The work of photographers Alfred Duggan-Cronin, Francki Burger and Nomusa Makhubu serves as specific examples on how photography can be linked with architecture. This is discussed in terms of galleries and museums and how these building types can be designed in terms of photographic and phenomenological paradigms.
Key words: photography, memory, place, identity, museum, gallery, design

Die rol van fotografie , plek en herinnering in die ontwerp van gallerye en museums
Die verhouding tussen fotografie en die manier hoe fotograwe plek interpreteer word ondersoek en beskryf. Fenomenologie dien as metodiese en teoretiese invalshoek; spesifiek die fenomenologie van Norberg-Schultz. Die verband tussen fotografie en argitektuur word duideliker in die lig van Peter Zumthor se interpretasie van die rol van die geheue in argitektuur. Die werke van fotograwe soos Alfred Dubban-Cronin, Francki Burger en Nomusa Machubu dien as voorbeelde om die argument te verduidelik. Hierdie voorbeelde word bespreek in terme van die gallery- en museum tipologie en hul ontwerp onder die sambreel van die intellektuele modelle van fotografie en fenomenologie.
Sleutelwoorde: fotografie, geheue, identiteit, plek, museum, gallery, ontwerp

Architects, photographers, artists and novelists have addressed the issue of landscape and place, and the connection it has to identity. Almost every aspect of contemporary life has been altered, enriched and defined by photography, and when it is used to study landscape it can become a powerful tool in our understanding of a place, its identity and meaning. The specific relationship between architecture, place and photography is explored in this essay as well as how these factors influence gallery and museum design specifically.

The extent to which our existence depends upon images in a world bound together by visual communication is undeniable: photographs are often credible sources of illustrating the past as well as a widely accepted communication device in the present, and can be an important reference for future generations (Booth & Weinstein 1977: 3). Photography is embedded in almost every aspect of our visual culture (Campany 2003: 11) and in the South African context the documentation and interpretation of the landscape is relevant especially since our identities are closely linked to our surroundings.

Phenomenology is defined by David Woodruff Smith (2011: online) as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of this experience is its intention, that it is being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about an object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning - which represents the object - together with appropriate enabling conditions But Merleau-Ponty (in Casey 1997:238) describes it as a philosophy for which the world is always there before reflection begins, as an inalienable presence, with all its efforts concentrating upon achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world; endowing that contact with philosophical status. Phenomenology is the study of our being in the world, and photography can be an aid in gaining this understanding.

A photograph can capture the sense of a place in its most true visual form. J.H. van den Berg (in Pallasmaa 2005: 115) has remarked that poets and painters are born phenomenologists, but Juhani Pallasmaa (2005:115) also regards novelists, photographers, and film directors as such. It is when one combines the way a photographer captures the idea of a place with the considerations of architecturally displaying the phenomenological notion of the *genius loci* or 'spirit of place', championed by the architect and educator Christian Norberg-Schulz (Porter 2004: 12), that one discovers the link between photographic paradigm and architecture. Every image or memory needs a physical setting, a space where it took place. This means that photography has an inherent phenomenological quality and so gains new significance in the South African context where identity and landscape are intertwined.

Martin Heidegger (Casey 1997: xiii) also affirmed the significance of place as he discussed the destiny of modern technological culture. Certain devastating phenomena bring with them, as an aftershock, a new sensitivity to place. Precisely in its capacity to eliminate all perceptible places from a certain area, the prospect of nuclear annihilation heightens awareness of the fact that these places are irreplaceable, since they have singular configurations and unrepeatable histories. This is also significant in South Africa, because places such as Disrict Six, were erased, although not through bombs, but by bulldozers.

Swiss architect Peter Zumthor (2010:95) mentions the importance landscape (or place) has for him, saying that not only does nature feel close to him and larger than him at the same time, but landscape also gives him the feeling of being at home. The fact that he sees it as home is significant; it forms part of his identity and gives him a connection to history. He goes on to say:

> Landscape also contains history. People have always lived in landscapes and worked in landscapes. Sometimes the landscape suffers from having us live and work in it. Nonetheless, for better or for worse, it is there that the history of our involvement with the earth is stored. And that is probably why we call it a cultural landscape. So along with feeling that I am part of nature, the landscape also gives me the sense of being connected to history. (2010: 95)

Heidegger (in Casey 1997:262) also emphasises the importance between place and history, stating that the *polis* is the historical place (*Geshichtstatte)*, the there in which, out of which, and for which history happens. Thus every significant space is a place and scene of history.

Norberg-Schulz states (in Nesbitt 1996: 421) that man builds what he has seen in order to visualise his understanding of nature, in essence expressing the existential foothold he has gained. The same is true of photography: it is a means of capturing the essence of a place in a certain moment and becomes an aid to memory, especially in the sense that the acts of seeing and photographing have been made to seem fused into one (Campany 2003: 168). It is through this fused action that it becomes part of the way a place is internalised through memory.

If the purpose of architecture is to make a site become a place, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt 1996: 422), then photography can capture the essence of a place at a certain moment; contributing to the human need for an existential foothold. Zumthor (2010: 11) writes that buildings can be witnesses to the human ability to construct concrete things. Through this construction both an existential foothold and understanding of place is gained.

Designing a new museum in a complex context is difficult and to create a building that speaks of its site and context in a poetic way even more so. Capturing the sense of place is elusive and photography may be the way to ease this process.

Photographers also attempt to capture the sense of place in their images. The importance of photography to architecture lies in the fact that photography mechanically repeats that which can never existentially be repeated. It captures a moment and place accurately and it thus makes sense to have a tool that works from reality bringing with it more reality (Morales in Cros 2003: 476).

A photograph of the site and the building creates new instances for memories to be linked to; also helping to strengthen the existential foothold, by documenting the physical building in a way that triggers memories of the space. The double use of photography in a variety of contexts, used as an element to both show and depict, sets the use of this medium clearly apart from the use of other pictures (Gaut and Lopes 2001: 616) such as sketches or paintings. Photography is unique in its capturing of a truth, a specific instance. There is more to a photo than just the presented image.

Architecture is a combination of the everyday, the known site, yet it can reveal more about the place, its history and its meaning. Each visitor will bring their own personal interpretation to a building and will have their own unique experience, even though the elements of the context may be familiar and known. Zumthor (2010: 42) describes the presence a building can have in connection with its location:

> When I come across a building that has developed a special presence in connection with the place it stands in, I sometimes feel that it is imbued with an inner tension that refers to something over and above the place itself. It seems to be part of the essence of its place, and at the same time it speaks of the world as a whole. When an architectural design draws solely from tradition and only repeats the dictates of its site, I sense a lack of genuine concern with the world and the emanations of contemporary life. If a work of architecture speaks only of contemporary trends and sophisticated visions without triggering vibrations in its place, this work is not anchored in its site, and I miss the specific gravity of the ground it stands on.

Zumthor reveals the importance of understanding and the need and concern an architect should have for a site, so that a newly designed building may fulfil its purpose of creating an existential foothold, and not merely become some contemporary element just placed on a site. Photography can be a method to gain this understanding. The South African context and landscape is filled with ambiguity and through photography these ambiguities may become clear and tangible for the architect.

The importance of photography in furthering the understanding of a place or revealing new interpretations, is explored by South African photographer Francki Burger. She reinterprets place and history by undertaking a journey through the imagery of the past, all the while searching for aspects of her own identity and need for belonging. She searches for traces and footprints of cultural identity, especially that of the Afrikaner, in the landscape (Van Bosch 2011: 7). Architects can gain understanding by investigating the sites, with the same sense of urgency and need to understand its history, but also to the memories associated with it, even if these memories are unclear and ambiguous.

Memory

Memory plays a powerful role in forming identity and is an influence in both architecture and photography. It is a leading factor in architectural design, since all awareness of the past is founded in memory, existing buildings are used as precedents and so memory is often used as an initial concept. The manifestation of architecture can itself provide a kind of knowledge through

which the past remains accessible as it is also crucial for a sense of identity (Porter 2004: 17). Thus architecture and memory are inextricably linked.

Photography can also achieve the same links to the past by strengthening certain memories or revealing new layers of the history of a site. Yet memory is not easily defined, since it is always selective, with timely tactical lapses (Gausa 2003: 428). The past is also viewed through the lens of the present. Elizabeth Grosz (in Porter 2004:116) said that: "Memory is the present's mode of access to the past. The past is preserved in time, while the memory image, one of the past's images or elements, can be selected according to present interests". Memory is a form of interpretation in itself.

Because a photograph combines that which everyone sees and knows with the emotional manifestation which is personal to every observer; the photographical image resembles reality, but does not necessarily represent it. Before photography there was nothing that served the same function, apart from memory (Wilken 2009: 22). The ideal landscape of memory does not resemble true reality either, identity is strongly linked to place, and that can become idealised in the mind's eye; but a photograph may serve as a link to reality if not truthfully representing it.

The *camera obscura* as most basic form of photography shares these characteristics with memory. The image one sees through a *camera obscura* is known to be a depiction of reality, but is blurred and inverted, as memory can also become tainted and unclear. Contemporary photographers create a new sense of blurring or ambiguity to the image and the way it describes a place, through different methods.

In this sense one can once again refer to Francki Burger's work as well as to that of Nomusa Makhubu. Burger explores the layers of meaning beneath the immediate viewing and physical surface of the photographic image. With the re-photographing and superimposing of historic and present landscapes, Burger's photos are filled with history and memory (Van Bosch 2011: 7). This brings forth a new interpretation of a known landscape, a blurring of what one thinks the site is, much as a new building may bring new meaning and a new sense of place with it.

Figure 1
Francki Burger, *Veld 1*, 2005, Hand-printed fibre based silver gelatin print, 30cm x 30cm,
(source online: http://www.franckiburger.com/fineart4.html)

Figure 2
Francki Burger, *Veld VIII*, 2005, Hand-printed fibre based silver gelatin print, 30cm x 30cm,
(source online: http://www.franckiburger.com/fineart4.html)

Makhubu similarly juxtaposes herself with historic photographs in various self portraits, reinterpreting historic material in terms of her own memory and experience (http://www. photographersgalleryza.co.za/photographers/makhubu-nomusa). She 'blurs' her contemporary identity with the identity of her forebears, indicating the inherent ambiguity that lies within the search for identity in South Africa.

The difficulty of understanding a sense of place in the current context is evident. Designing buildings in this context is thus inherently complex as well. Through the use of photography this can be made simpler for architects, serving as a touchstone for the design that follows. But designing a building simply on the basis of 'memory' cannot lead to good architecture. What one can attempt is to interpret a site and through this bring its history and memory into presence.

Berger states that the camera records appearances through the medium of light like the eye, but unlike the eye, fixes the set of appearances which it records, much like memory. Memory preserves an event from being covered and therefore hidden by events that come after it. It holds a single event (Wilken 2009: 22). Yet this event is an individual experience. Architecture, by capturing the essence of a site or place can in turn hold a memory, the place wherein it took place. But this remains a personal experience that will vary with each visitor to the site.

Figure 3
Nomusa Makhubu, *Lover*, 2007, Digital print on Fabriano, 100cmx70cm,
(source online: http://www.photographersgalleryza.co.za/nomusa-makhubu/self-portrait-project/lover.jpg)

Zumthor (2010: 41) explains the importance of the 'memory' of a site when designing:

> When I concentrate on a specific site or place for which I am going to design a building, when I try to plumb its depths, its form, its history, and its sensuous qualities, images of other places start to invade this process of precise observation: images of places that I know and that once impressed me, images of ordinary or special places that I carry with me as inner visions of specific moods and qualities; images of architectural situations, which emanate from the world of art, of films, theatre, or literature.

He attempts to find his own understanding, his own experience and works from within this very personal realm. Rather than trying to create something universal, he creates a building that has resonance in his own memory. That process he believes can have an effect on others as well. Perhaps the only way to design a meaningful building is to take this very individual approach.

Steven Holl (in Porter 2004:6) mentions that architecture fixed in a place and space in time can evoke a more profound connection through memory and through the architectural inscription of historical traces on a site. Of course the problem of individual interpretation in design and photography cannot be ignored. But through the use of both a greater understanding may be gained.

The work of Alfred Duggan-Cronin is significant in this sense. Worked in a De Beers mine compound in Kimberley around 1897, he became interested in photography; and photographed the indigenous people of Southern Africa, undertaking at least 18 expeditions (Hart 2007: 68). His subjects were photographed from a scientific point of view, but the subjects have since become more than just samples of anthropological data. The images have become captured memories as well, although not intended to be emotionally driven these photographs have acquired a new emotional meaning in post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa.

There is a link between the scientific and emotional. These photos do not capture an event but rather portray a way of thinking, as well as serving as documents of past cultures. Meanings change over time and these images have a hybrid, changing potential. Cros (2005: 511) mentions that reality is not always what you think you see. Von Meiss (1991: 27) also states that perception is not neutral. That what we see is continually compared to situations we previously experienced, memory forms the testing ground.
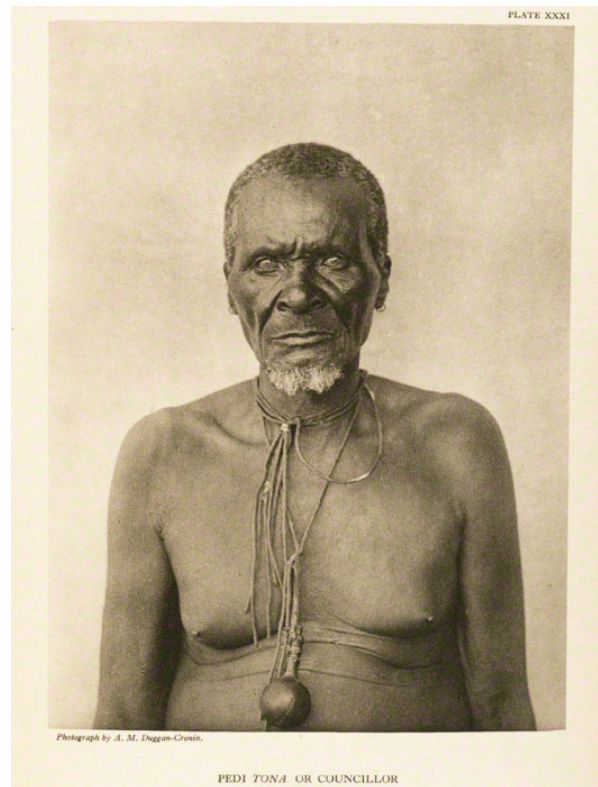
Figure 4
Alfred Duggan-Cronin, *Pedi Tona or Councillor*, 1928, Photograph,
(source: Duggan-Cronin 1928: plate XXXI)

When the viewer experiences space in terms of memory and physicality, the *genius loci* becomes apparent and the viewer does not just look, but *sees* and absorbs and experiences the place (Wilken 2009: 23). In a sense the 'image' becomes blurred and its essence is revealed rather than what is blatantly obvious.

If the visitor's gaze is focused on an element, if only for a brief moment, a truth might be revealed to them. In this sense a site may be documented both photographically and architecturally, as Duggan-Cronin did with the people he photographed, by designing certain spaces in a way as to focus the visitor's gaze. A building can also bring a sense of place into presence much as the photograph brings its subject into reality. A photograph can bring into presence, not only the captured moment but also new associations and interpretations of it. It creates the choice of interpretation and is thus more than mere representation. Photographers explore the nature of their medium and thereby reveal aspects of the world. (Gaut and Lopes 2001: 614) Architects can do the same. Certain aspects of a site can be made to be seen as more important, or its impact accentuated and other elements can be downplayed. Views can be framed or discarded much like a photographer decides what subject to photograph.

The emotional resonance a photograph can have is also proven in the case of the Monument Dutch Reformed Church in Bloemfontein. Even though the church had not had an active congregation for a number of years, the partial demolition and reuse of the building still evokes a sense of loss and many people in the surrounding areas photographed the process, as way of trying to establish a moment in time to aid their own memories. As time passes new elements, new meanings and experiences are revealed (Wilken 2009: 22) on a site as memory plays a more and more important role as events recede further into the past.

Figure 5
Wanda Verster, *NG Kerk Monument*, 2011, Digital Photograph
(by author)

Galleries and Museums in terms of Place and Memory

New additions to buildings will bring with it new connotations and experiences. Since the invention of photography it has been used as a tool of classification and ordering (Campany 2003: 168). Of course photographs have historical value. They support the study and interpretation of history and any photograph becomes a visual artefact the moment after it is made, although it is not always valued as a historical treasure (Booth and Weinstein 1977: 5).

Gaston Bachelard (in Porter 2004: 48) states simply that space has a history. But this again touches on the important role memory plays in terms of design that one cannot deny the past of a certain site or existing building even if it seems unimportant.

Tadao Ando also bases his design process on a phenomenological way of looking at a site. He appreciates the sense of place much like Zumthor, conscious of the influence architecture can have saying that the presence of architecture – regardless of its self-contained character –

inevitably creates a new landscape. He advocates the necessity of discovering the architecture which the site itself is seeking (Ando in Nesbitt 1996: 461). He is in fact then seeking to bring the essence of the site into presence, not responding to - but finding the true sense of place by the addition of architecture.

> The architectural pursuit implies a responsibility to find and draw out a site's formal characteristics, along with its cultural traditions, climate, and natural environmental features, the city structure that forms its backdrop, and the living patterns and age-old customs that people will carry into the future. Without sentimentality, I aspire to transform place through architecture to the level of the abstract and universal. (Ando in Nesbitt 1996: 461)

As mentioned, the design of a gallery can be done in such a way as to frame aspects of the site. These frames can focus the attention of a visitor on a certain aspect of the truth of the site. When a gallery is designed with openings in the journey, with open air spaces or courtyards, moments are created where one can reflect on the exhibitions or where one can dwell on memory.

The concept of imagination is usually attached to a specific human creative capacity or to the realm of art, but our imagination forms the foundation of our very mental existence and of our way of dealing with stimuli and information. It is through imagination that memories and experiences are understood and we may be equally moved by something evoked by the imagination as by anything that is actually physically encountered (Pallasmaa 2005: 130).

That which is evoked by the building or photographs viewed when moving through it can have a great impact on the visitor. The act of perceiving the environment becomes part of the experience. The physical, emotional, visual and even spiritual journey has to be taken into account. Spaces for reflection and movement are needed as well as a choice between them to facilitate the mental journey. Since the visitor's own imagination will contribute largely to the way they experience the site; the personal contribution of a viewer cannot be ignored.

> The impact of the art of architecture derives from the ontology of inhabiting space; architecture's task is to frame, structure, and give meaning to our being in the world. We inhabit our world, and our particular way of inhabitation obtains its fundamental sense through constructions of architecture." (Pallasmaa 2005: 132)

Architecturally the distinction between galleries and the environment has led to cocoons. It is easier to safeguard and monitor these sealed buildings, but the experience is no more enjoyable than that of visiting a shopping mall. This does not need to be the norm (Correa 1999: 332). Cocoons in turn do not necessarily need to denote negative experiences; it can become spaces where one can intensely experience memories. Galleries are not designed as separated entities without purpose. Serenity, silence and a sense of holiness are factors that influence and cause this type of design. However the intended serenity or silence of museum spaces may be lost with large crowds. Modern museums need to perform many roles and this creates the problem of serene space versus the needs of hordes of tourists.

The role of the museum is both aesthetic and didactic, both temple and forum (Saieh 2010: online). Combining the temple and forum may not always be possible and one or the other may be the only solution, choosing either the temple or the forum, either the white cube or the artwork.

A museum has the potential to open a discussion on how people were viewed in the past and how photography was used as both scientific tool and artistic medium. Thus it follows, that the manner in which the art is displayed and experienced is an essential part of the dialogue between time, art, and the individual (Ante 2005: 5). This does not necessarily mean that the

artwork type of building, boldly seeking controversy and discussion is the only answer. A building can provide opportunity for dialogue through different means, such as the juxtaposition between old and new.

Architecture is a way of understanding and interpreting reality and as such takes certain information, processes it and returns it in several possible meanings, projecting an image made of multiple visions, distortions and suggestions. This is the result of a reflection on reality, a mental process. In other words, the result of a reflection on reality is the reflection of another reality, projected through a filter of experiences, potential needs and moods (Cros 2003: 511). In this sense a museum may reveal aspects of the reality and history of the site through the possibility of interpreting photographs. "The gaze holds hidden experiences, knowledge and expectations." (Von Meiss 1991: 27) The building holds opportunities for one's 'gaze' to reveal this.

> The gaze is a glance that relies essentially on language and its histories, and ends with the meaning of words and things. The gaze is the eradication of 'true' stories, perhaps to make entrance into the present. Thanks to the gaze, space clears itself of time, it moves to its 'outside'. Space, thus visualized, is a radical transformation of time; it is as though what we check upon visualizing a photograph, where, on the fringe of narration, we presence the radicality of its figures. (Morales in Cross 2003: 252*)

If one can provide instances where the gaze reveals new experiences, where architecture and photography are combined to create a meaningful space and when the architect understands the site in this way, then one might be able to design in the way that Zumthor (2010:65) suggests:

> The strength of a good design lies in ourselves and in our ability to perceive the world with both emotion and reason. A good architectural design is sensuous. A good architectural design is intelligent.

Figure 6
Peter Zumthor: Kolumba Museum- Köln, Germany
(online Woodman, E. 2010: http://www.core.form-ula.com/2007/12/17/2074/)

He achieves much of which he mentions in the Kolumba museum in Köln, Germany. The building is multilayered, contemporary but sensitive to the timeline and context that it resides in. The new seems to grow out of the medieval remnants. The various fragments on the site are united through the use of material and attention to detail. These fragments include pieces of the Gothic Church, stone ruins of Roman and Medieval periods as well as the chapel for the Madonna of the Ruins by Gottfried Böhm (Cilento 2010: online).

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The use of grey brick integrates the remnants of the ruin's facade into a new face for the contemporary museum. Articulated with perforations, the brick work allows diffused light to fill specific spaces of the museum, creating as the seasons change, a peaceful yet ever-changing space (Cilento 2010: online). The space has a quality similar to what one's memory might conjure up, incomplete pieces of a past structure becomes part of a new understanding, a new layer on the site. The historical ruins gain new significance through the reinterpretation of the addition.

Figure 7
Peter Zumthor: Kolumba Museum interior- Köln, Germany
(online Vasquez, J. 2010: http://www.archdaily.com/72192/kolumba-musuem-peter-zumthor/)

A courtyard space provides a secluded space for contemplation, a place where one can make sense of memories and new experiences.

Figure 8
Peter Zumthor: Kolumba Museum Courtyard- Köln, Germany
(online Vasquez, J. 2010: http:// www.archdaily.com/72192/kolumba-musuem-peter-zumthor/26-custom/)

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It is when a building is sensitive to its surroundings but not overly so, that a strong reinterpretation brings new meaning and significance to a site. The dialogue initiated between the past and present, the previous place and the new place provides an opportunity for contemplation and new understanding. Although seemingly cold and dissociated from its context, the museum enters into a discussion, between that what was and that what will be and in so doing integrates itself into its site, not merely sitting on top of a ruin, but providing new significance to it.

Conclusion

In a complex and multi-layered context, photography can serve as a way furthering understanding of the meaning of a specific site or a larger landscape. Architects need to be sensitive to the nature and meaning of a site and this can be made easier through the use of photography and its various incarnations. When one then designs a building that is very closely linked to these ideas, the use of photography can serve as part of the design process, not merely to document the site, but to understand it, both in terms of its physical nature and its metaphysical qualities.

Phenomenologically speaking, each site has a unique identity - a true sense of place. This can be interpreted and documented through photographs or remembered in the mind's eye. Memories and photographs will in turn help to strengthen or even change a specific site's identity. It is then through architecture that all these elements can be brought together in a meaningful way. As an architect one must then attempt to bring a coherent vision through these elements.

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Wanda Verster is a Researcher at the Department of Architecture at the University of the Free State, as well as a candidate architect for the firm Architects Celliers Greyvenstein. She obtained her M.Arch. Prof. degree in 2010 and is pursuing a M.Arch on the churches in Bloemfontein.