

# CAPE VERNACULAR INTERPRETATIONS

BY **ARTHUR BARKER**

THE DEMISE OF the Modern Movement resulted in a plethora of architectural responses. Venturi argued for 'Complexity and Contradiction' (1966) in architecture, while contrastingly, Rudofsky (1964) and Oliver (1969), in their studies on the vernacular, motivated for a return to basics; to an architecture of authenticity. Ironically, this echoed the original intentions of the Modern Movement, underscored the early investigative travels of Le Corbusier and supported the aims of 'The other tradition of Modern Architecture' as espoused by Colin St. John Wilson (2007).

Vernacular building is an authentic architectural response to physical and socio-cultural context. It constantly evolves through influences such as the arrival of a new group of people with different cultural practices, new functional requirements or changes in technology. These shifts are concretised in the hands of craftsmen or designers who reconcile modern dictates with the necessity for historical continuity and cultural meaning.

Rapoport (2006:182) and Ozkan (2007:104) argue that approaches to vernacular architecture vary from the replicative to the interpretative. The former tends towards a scenographic approach while the latter transforms vernacular principles to suit modern conditions. Neither approach of these diametric poles is a satisfactory response. The limitations of scenography freeze architecture in time, diminishing its validity, while a process of interpretation can abstract the architecture to such an extent that historic continuity is lost. Rather an attenuative approach is required, one that mediates between the approaches of the extreme poles.

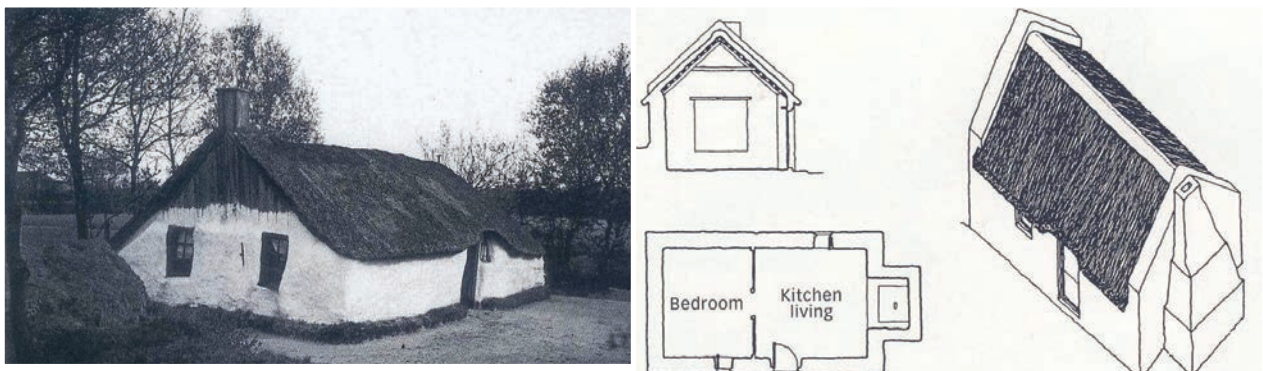
In the 1950s, architects such as Pius Pahl (1909-2003), Revel Fox (1924-2004), and Gabriel Fagan (1925-) synthesised the haptic and spatial qualities of Cape vernacular buildings with the architectural approaches of the Modern Movement so as to suit new functional requirements and through this process developed a seminal modern, but place-specific, domestic architecture. This article will highlight the importance of the Cape vernacular and how it has been adopted and adapted over time.

## THE CAPE VERNACULAR

The Cape vernacular, as an inherited tradition, has endured for over three hundred years through its close response to place, technology and culture. It has been revered by architects such as Baker (1862-1946) (Keath, 1994), Pearse (1885-1968) (1933), Eaton (1902-1966) (Fagan, 1996:5) (see Fig. 12) and Biermann (1924-1991) (1955) (see Fig. 12). Even the South African Modern Movement pioneer, Martienssen recognised its importance as an authentic architecture.

Picture a Cape Dutch farmhouse. Thatch and whitewash. Oak trees screening the open stoep. Then wide, green doors, windows delightfully proportioned, and great tiles covering the floors. There is nothing inconsequent about these elements, these materials arose from a divine instinct for what is good, from a sure knowledge of the fundamentals of fine building. (Martienssen, 1928:1)

The Cape vernacular tradition has undergone four important shifts. The first imported Dutch/German rural tradition (van der Meulen, 1963 and Japha et al, 1997:2150) (see Fig. 1) took on a limited influence of the Khoi-Khoi, through the adaptation of the reeded roofs such as those extant at Puntjie in the Cape (Fisher, 1997) to form a first vernacular (Greig, 1971:13). The basic element of South African colonial architecture is a broad, freestanding, single-story building of only one room in depth. The high thatched roof is framed by parapet gables, its dark tone forming a strong contrast to the whitewashed walls. (Van der Meulen, 1963:52)



**Figure 1. Left: Vernacular farm dwelling in Friesland, Netherlands (Van Olst, E.L. 1991:77). Right: Plan, section and axonometric of typical 19th-century vernacular dwelling in Struisbaai, Southern Cape. (Japha, D and V, 1997:2159)**

A Georgian influence transformed the typical Cape block form by introducing British characteristics such as narrow passageways and Classical internal and external details from pattern books (Japha et al, 1997:2157 and Greig, 1971:18). The use of verandas and shutters extended the colonial tradition climatically and as Greig has suggested (1971:18) created a second (Cape) vernacular.

The third influence was the Arts and Crafts approach of Baker which already had its roots in British and European vernacular traditions, particularly through its manifestation in England as the Dutch influenced ‘Queen Anne Style’. The resulting ‘Baker School’ (often referred to as Cape Dutch revival) further extended the Cape architectural traditions, albeit in a more structured and architecturally designed manner. Greig (1970 and 1971), Prinsloo (2000:123) and Joubert (2009:9) have noted that Baker synthesised the Cape vernacular into a classical eclectic approach by adopting and transforming vernacular elements and adding others to achieve as Keath (1994:30) has noted, a Free Style vernacular. This replicative approach was balanced with an interpretative approach to planning that fused the traditional centralised organisations with an Arts and Crafts organicism.

**THE FOURTH CAPE VERNACULAR INTERPRETATION**

Houses designed by Pius Pahl, Revel Fox and Gawie Fagan during the 1950s and 1960s built on and developed the formal, spatial and technological legacy of the preceding Cape vernaculars. Simple white box forms, often with fireplaces as focal elements provided aesthetic continuity while haptic qualities were extended through the use of white painted bagged brickwork, clay tiles floors and simple pitched roofs. Functional organisations, influenced by Modern Movement tendencies, ordered space efficiently while resolving the conflict of external contact and the introverted nature of the vernacular model. A simple approach to technology emulated that of old and fostered an economy of means. The attenuative design approaches recognised the restraints of the vernacular while contextualising Modern Movement attitudes to space making, technology and climatic response. This approach layered a functional determinism on an established, formal and technological tradition.

**REVEL FOX**

In the Worcester houses, Fox’s design approach began in a replicative manner, later shifting to an interpretative way of working. Reynolds (who worked for Fox in his Worcester office) suggests (1998:39) that it was the simpler single-roof pitched workers houses that Fox found inspiration in, rather than the larger and more ostentatious homesteads of the area as they demonstrated a simplicity and economy of means effectively dealing with tight budgets. Jean Welz (1900-1975), a local artist and Bauhaus trained architect, must have been influential in this regard as Fox notes that he often visited the office, critiqued their designs and encouraged them to look closely at the vernacular architecture of the Boland (Fox, 1998:27). But underlying the yearning for a connection with place through tradition, there is a classical formalism in Fox’s domestic architecture (Dubow, 1998:44). There is little fluidity evident in form making or spatial organisation. A grid-like structure orders the plans while the extremities of the box form are rigidly adhered to. These Bauhaus tendencies were probably learnt from the lecturers at the University of Cape Town who were mostly trained at Architectural Association. The late Modern Scandinavian tendency for synergy between building and landscape was also instrumental in the forming of Fox’s domestic architecture, inspired by his sojourn there in the early 1950s. Just as Aalto’s work vacillated between the extremes of National Romanticism and Romantic Classicism (Frampton, 1992: 193) so did Fox’s, as it mediated between the simplicity of the Cape tradition and the canonical sophistication of the Modern Movement.

House Wilson (1954) (see Fig. 2) is replicative in form and aesthetic as it relies on double pitched roofs, distinctive chimney elements and small windows on approach edges. Although modern technologies were used to construct the house, white painted plastered walls and quarry tile floors derive from tradition. The functional organisation reflects an interpretative attitude through the definition of a court space by four boxes (a closure of the traditional H plans) and the reliance on large glazed openings to the rear edges for sunlight and view.

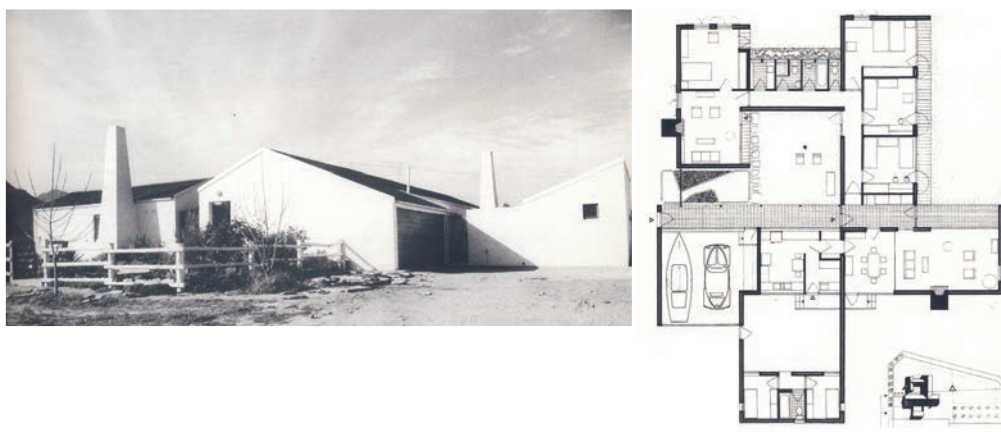
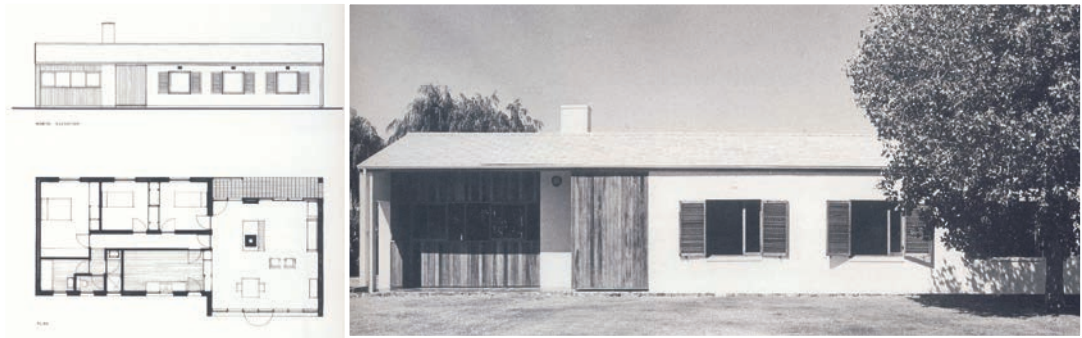


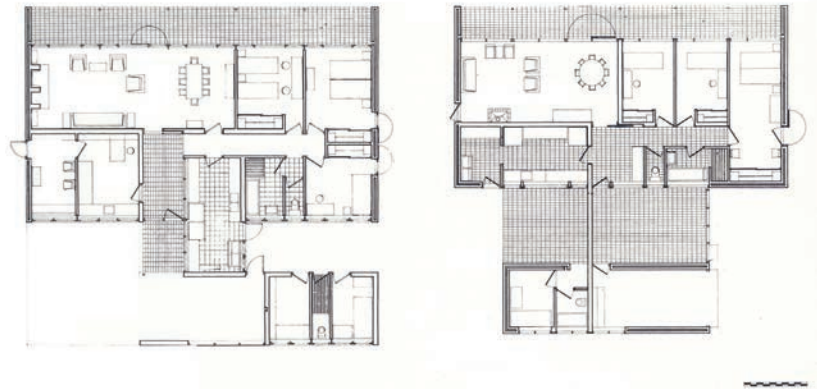
Figure 2. Left: Front view of House Wilson, (1955) (Fox1998:81). Right: Plan (Fox1998:80).

House Droomer (see Fig. 3) continues the replicative stance but achieves a planning economy through a service core and limited circulation space. The introduction of timber clad walls recalls a Scandinavian tradition, reminiscent of Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea, while the simplicity and internalisation of the chimney express a shift from the vernacular tradition.



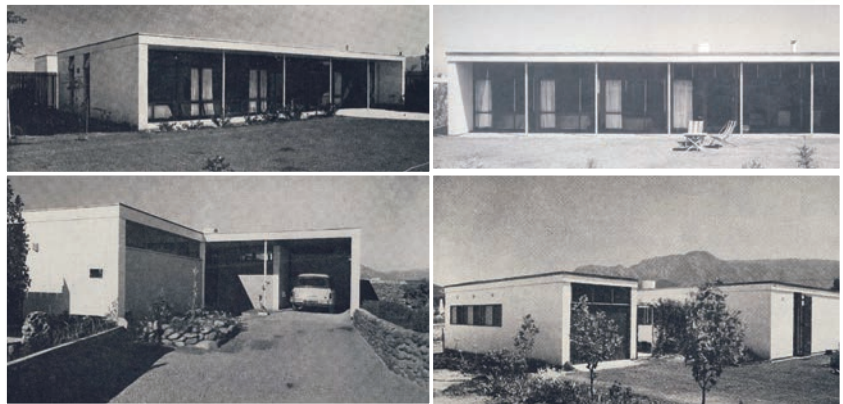
**Figure 3.** Left: Elevation and plan of House Droomer, Worcester, Western Cape (1955). Right: Garden view to House Droomer (all Fox 1998:84).

Houses Fox and Ross (see Fig. 4) are more interpretative of the vernacular, Fox relying on Modern Movement responses to climate, function and form making. On approaching the building, two parallel box forms with flat roofs are defined by solid walls with few punctured openings and contrasting floor to ceiling glazing on opposite edges. An uncompromising attitude to function is generated through contracted service zones while simplicity of form and tectonics pay homage to the vernacular.



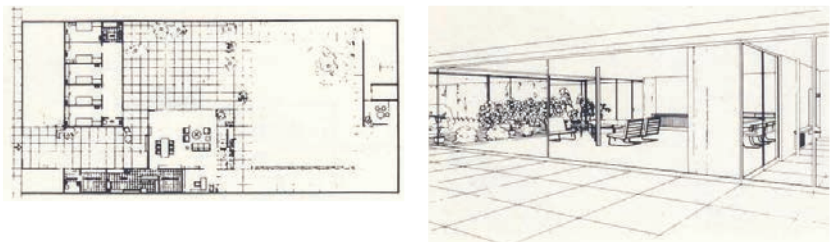
### PIUS PAHL

Pahl arrived in the Cape with his Cape Town born wife and five children in 1952. His Bauhaus training and work experience fostered a functionalist and spatially open architecture. He approached the Cape vernacular with circumspection, appreciating its qualitative nature and contextual appropriateness. Pahl's approach to the vernacular was mainly interpretative as there are few, if any, replicative elements to be found in his houses. He responded to climate and setting and used materials such as white painted walls, brick floors and timber pergolas. It was possibly Pahl's pre-Bauhaus training as a craftsman that fostered this technological affinity.



**Figure 4.** Left: Plan of and garden and entrance views to House Ross, Worcester, Western Cape (1955) (Fox, 1998:83 and Architect and Builder, April 1958:46). Right: Plan of and garden and entrance views to House Fox, Worcester, Western Cape (1955) (Architect and Builder, April 1958:42,45.)

The response to the vernacular is experiential and focuses attention on relationships to view and solar orientation and the development of thresholds between inside and outside. These are possibly the result of a synergy between the tenets of the Modern Movement and the influence of the vine covered pergolas common in Stellenbosch. Pahl furthers his European mediation be-



**Figure 5.** Left: House Dessau (1930s) plan (Pius Pahl student). Right: House Dessau perspective (both UIA International, 1985:60)

tween plasticity (here perhaps a combination of Le Corbusier's work and the first Cape vernacular) and the purist aspects of the Modern Movement such as the structural grid and economies of planning. He also furthers his exploration of the courtyard house typology (see Fig. 5), very similar to the Fox explorations in Worcester.

House Trumpelman (see Fig. 6) is an eclectic combination of an ordered courtyard plan that expresses a Miesian continuity of space with the partial containedness of the Cape vernacular. This was probably also an extension of Pahl's student work (see Fig. 5) where he balanced contained and lightly framed spaces. It relies heavily on the experiential approach from below turning the viewer through one hundred and eighty degrees to expose the panoramic mountain view. The design is interpretative, relying on a lighter tectonic and more open quality to the courtyard plan establishing a greater synergy with the landscape. It is also reminiscent of Fox's House Wilson of 1954, but freer and lighter in its interpretation. The low pitched roofs mediate between traditional form and the Miesian flat roof. It is one of the few houses where Pahl shifts from the monotony of a single volume.

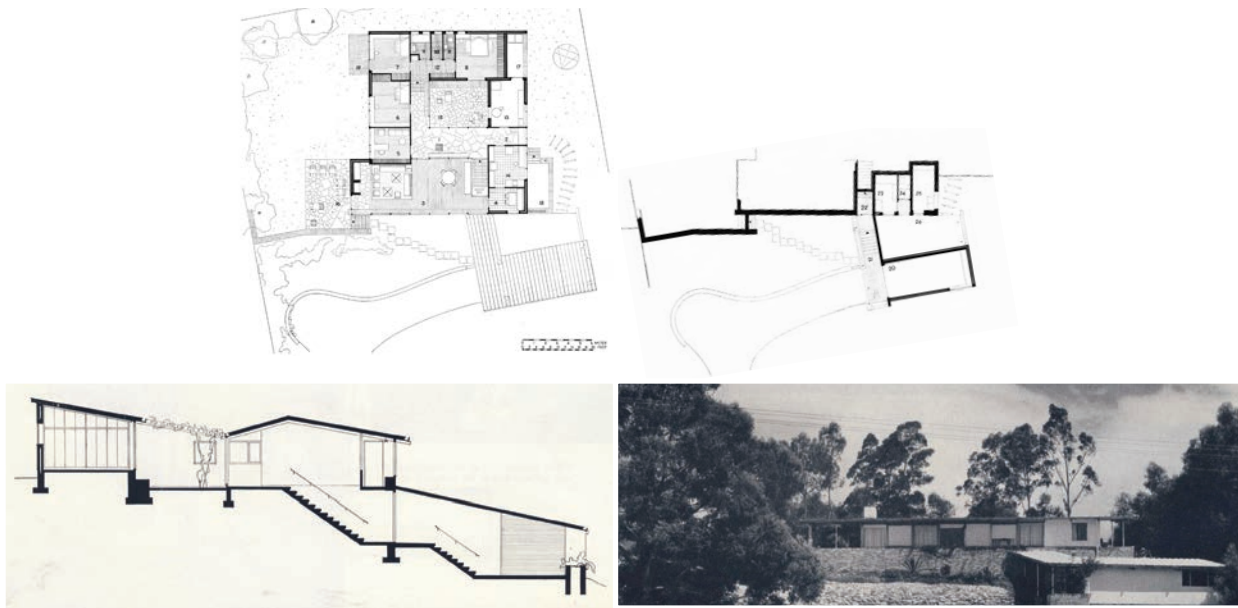


Figure 6. Top: House Trumpelman, Krigeville, Stellenbosch, 1954, ground floor and lower ground floor plans. Bottom: section and view from garden below. (all Architect and Builder, January 1958:38-42)

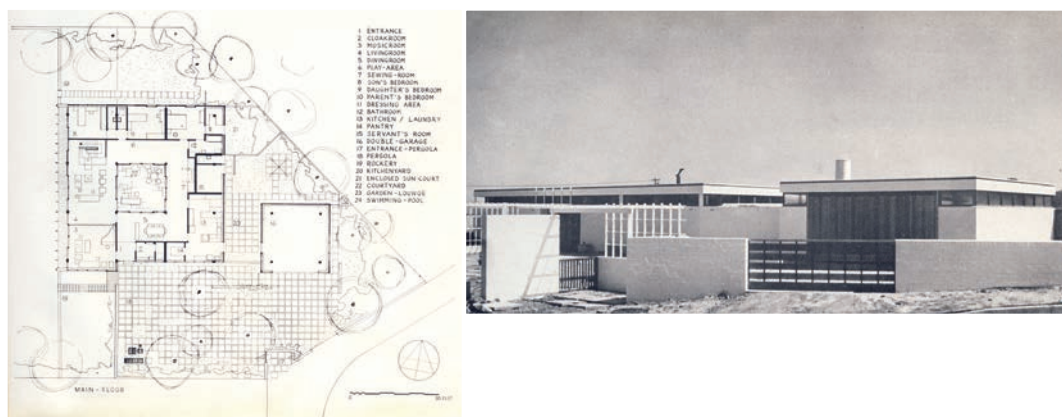


Figure 7. Plan and street elevation, courtyard house, Parow North (Architect and Builder, January 1965:17)

House Malan (see Fig. 7) relies on an interpretative understanding of the Cape vernacular through its tectonic qualities framed in a Miesian structural logic. Pahl further develops his student inspired courtyard plan and fuses a light framed Modern Movement aesthetic with the stereotomic nature of the Cape wall to define more private zones. Bagged and painted brickwork is used to emulate the textural qualities of Cape walls. Modern Movement principles are applied through a fusion of inside and outside spaces and the Cape pergola tradition is reinterpreted in the extensive partly covered terraces to both front and rear spaces.

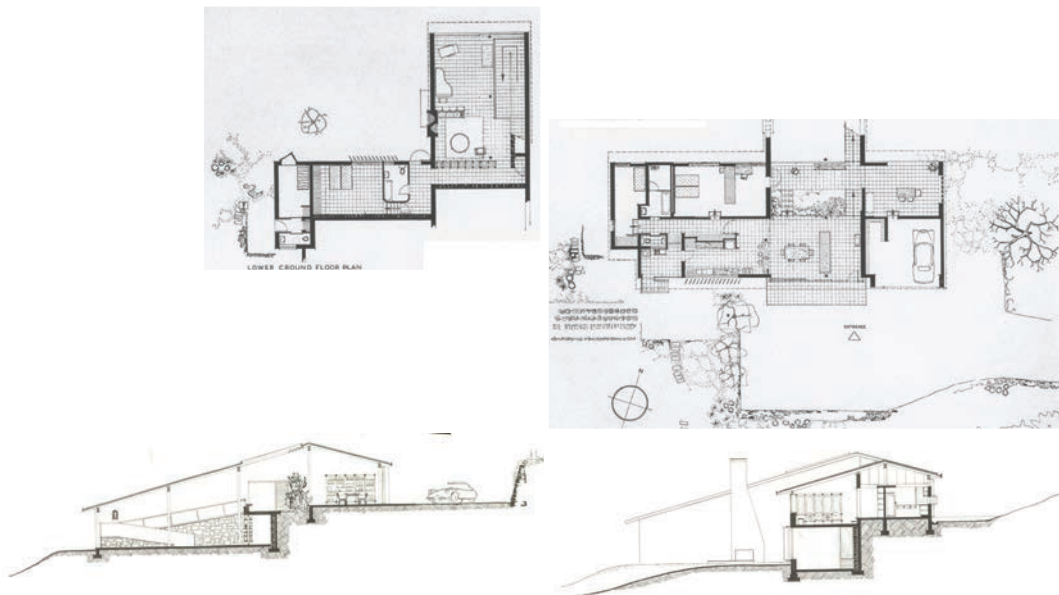
## GAWIE FAGAN

Fagan has been sensitised throughout his life to an architecture of the authentic through his upbringing in the Cape, physical engagement with place through pursuits like flying and sailing, his architectural education with a regional modern school in Pretoria, the twelve year stint with Volkskas Bank and later conservation work. He believes that ...a really thorough understanding of one's own vernacular architecture to be an essential and also the soundest basis, for continuing creation. (Fagan, 1985:2)

Fagan's domestic architecture of the 1950s and 1960s vacillates between replicative and interpretative approaches and builds mainly on the principles and plasticity of the first vernacular. This is reinforced by various lectures that he has given over the years (and the slides which support them), his development of a set of ten principles titled 'Learning from the Vernacular' (Fagan, 1996) and his detailed conservation work in many original Cape buildings. The principles express three overriding qualities that vernacular architecture possesses. These are a respect for place, technology as craft and the use of symbol. Fagan's approach to the vernacular is also biased towards the experiential where view and climate are synthesised with a Le Corbusian architectural promenade. Almost all of his houses rely on an interpretation of the singular vernacular object while the internal spatial typology is that of the central room with side rooms as seen in the first vernacular. The houses are in stark contrast to the houses of Fox and Pahl as they limit the reliance on passageways reinforcing their linkage to the first vernacular as the British influence (the second vernacular) resulted in organisations dominated by circulation.

## THE HOUSES

House Keurbos (see Fig. 8) is a seamless synergy between the first Cape vernacular and the ramped circulation route of Le Corbusier's Errazuriz house in Chile. Fagan relies on the nature of the vernacular as singular object in his new creation collapsing all accommodation, even garage and servant's quarters into a single whole. The introverted nature of the vernacular form is, however, countered by the entrance, living and circulation volume which release both outwardly and upwardly to create spaces that hover between indoor and outdoor, all with a controlling and sheltering roof form. The replicative nature of the fireplace anchors the house in height and position but its functional nature is reinterpreted to serve both inside and outside spaces. The tightness of vernacular form making shifts to accommodate elements that extend or layer onto the main form through the addition of an organic niche at the midpoint of the ramp, the extended window to the maid's room and the adjustable shutters. These counterpoints hint at an attitude towards plasticity beyond surface treatment that would later inform the making of entire form.



**Figure 8. Top: House Keurbos (1951), Bishopscourt, Cape Town lower ground and ground floor plans, (Fagan archive). Middle: Sections (Architect and Builder, November 1959:38). Bottom: inner court (Fagan archive) and view from garden (Architect and Builder, November 1959:34)**



Fagan's own house, Die Es (see Fig. 9), mediates between the functional rationalism of the Modern Movement and the formal plasticity of the singular Cape dwelling. It includes replicative features such as the chimney which becomes a winter room through its extended dimensions. The shutters of old become louvers that hover over glazed openings while west facing windows are protected by sliding screens. A play between organic and regular geometric forms further enhances the dialectic and a Cape ambience is affected through the roughly plastered white painted walls, quarry tile floors and timber syncopated roof. The architectural promenade is used to hide and reveal the sea view beyond.

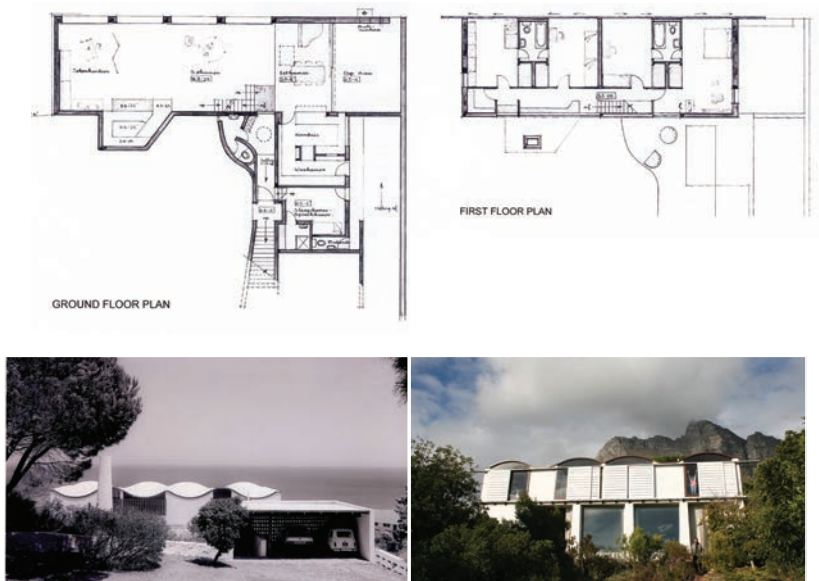


Figure 9. Top: Die Es (1963-5), Camps Bay, Cape Town, ground and first floor plans, (Fagan archive) Bottom left: Die Es (1963-5), Camps Bay, Cape Town, road view looking West (Fagan archive). Bottom right: view from the West

In house Raynham (see Fig. 10) Fagan reinterprets the plastic quality of the vernacular by moulding the entire built form. The chimney shifts to an internal position attached to a supporting concrete roof column. Few replicative elements remain save for the stable type doors to the bedrooms and the wall window proportion on the street edge. Tectonically there are connections to the vernacular through the brick floors, bagged and painted walls and timber ceilings.

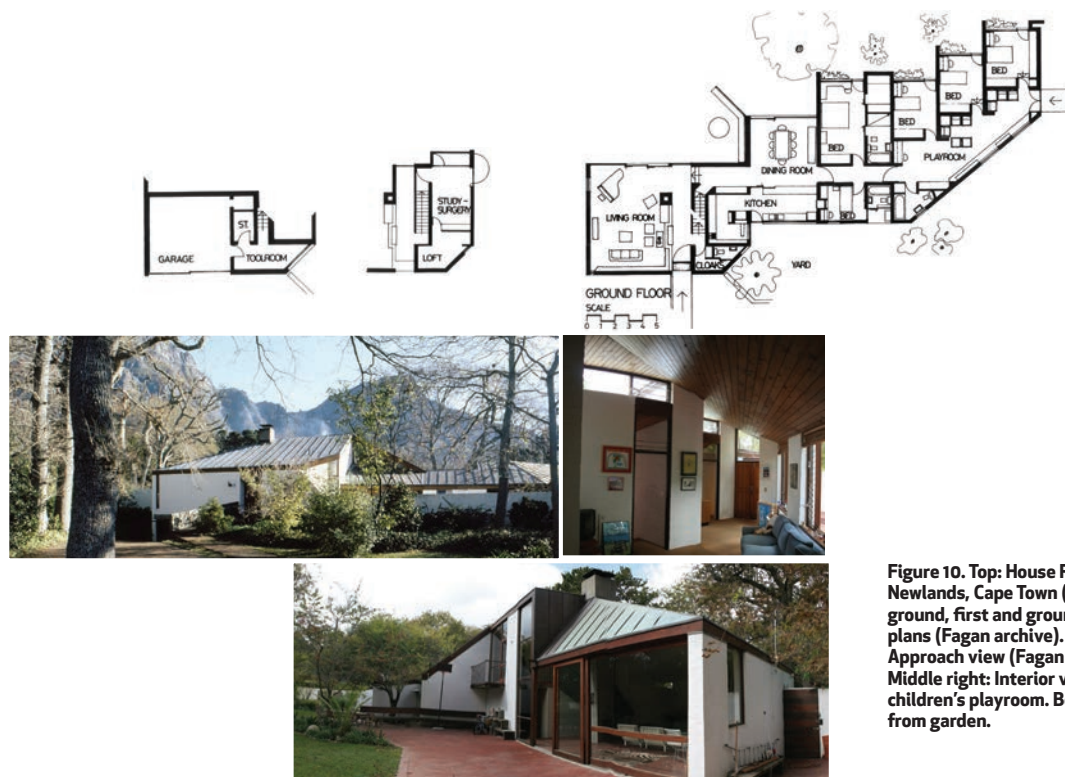
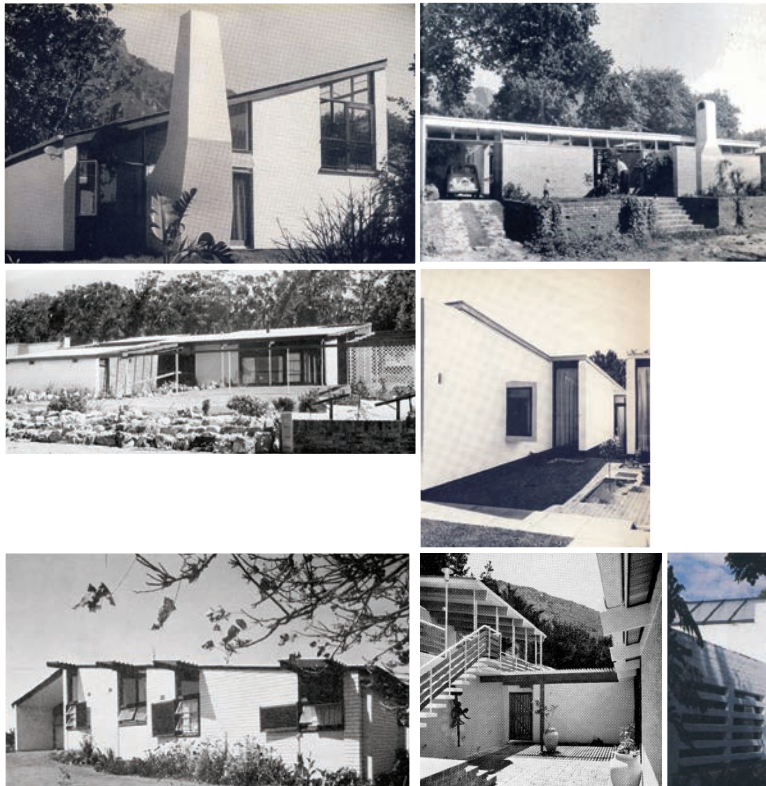


Figure 10. Top: House Raynham, Newlands, Cape Town (1967) lower ground, first and ground floor plans (Fagan archive). Middle left: Approach view (Fagan archive). Middle right: Interior view of children's playroom. Bottom: View from garden.

## CONCLUSION

During the 1950s Pius Pahl, Revel Fox and Gawie Fagan translated the Cape vernacular into a seminal domestic architectural variant through their replicative and interpretative design approaches. This fourth Cape vernacular found a new focus with other architects (Anon, undated, 36-37) in the Cape such as Sam Abramson, Mike Munnik, Colyn and Meiring, Naude, Papendorf, Van der Merwe and Meyer with Adèle-Marie Naudé and later Julian Elliott (see Fig. 11).



**Figure 11.** Top left: House Abramson, Newlands, Cape Town (Sam Abramson architect) south east view (Anon, undated:103). Top right: House Munnik, Newlands, Cape Town (M.H.R. Munnik Architect) south-east view (Anon, undated: 127). Middle left : House Naude, Kenilworth, Cape Town (Naude, Papendorf, Van der Merwe and Meyer architects with Adèle-Marie Naudé), south west facade, (Architect and Builder, April 1967:9). Middle right: House, Durbanville, Cape Town, (Colyn and Meiring architects), street view (Architect and Builder, July 1962:12). Bottom left: House Buurman, Belville, Cape Town, (Colyn April, 1962:10). Bottom right: House Elliot, Newlands, Cape Town (Julian Elliot architecture) , exterior and interior views, (Architecture South Africa, March/ April 2003:cover and 8).

Modern Movement responses to the Cape vernacular were not only to be found in the Cape region of South Africa. In different climatic contexts around the country University of Cape Town trained architects (see Fig. 12) furthered the tradition. Barrie Biermann's own house is masterful eclectic synergy between the plasticity and tectonic of the Cape vernacular, Modern Movement open planning and the Durban climate. Through his role as lecturer at the University of Natal he fostered a large group of sympathetic contextualists who were equally inspired by Brazilian modernism. Hans Hallen(1930-) and Danie Theron (1936-2011) as well as Paul Mikula all exhibit the tectonic and plastic quality of the Cape vernacular walls in their work. Norman Eaton imbued many of his buildings such as the van Wouw (1937) and Anderson Houses (1949-50) in Pretoria with an internal Cape aesthetic possibly fostered through his high school education in the Cape, his university field trip to measure up old Cape buildings with Pearse and his association with Baker. Eaton believed that a distinctive contemporary South African architectural idiom can again be achieved, as had been the case in 18th and 19th century Cape Dutch architecture. The essence of this new architecture will be an understanding and appreciation of the underlying principle of Cape Dutch architecture...(Du Toit, 1983:49)



**Figure 12.** Top left: Anderson House (1949), Pretoria (Norman Eaton architect) , (UIA International, 1985:22). Top right: House Biermann (1962), Barrie Biermann architect . Bottom left: House Mikula (1965-7)), Paul Mikula Architect (Architecture SA, May/ June 2005:14). Bottom right: House Manor Gardens, Durban (1973), Hallen and Theron architects (Architect and Builder, February 1973:34.35).

In the 1990s and 2000s a further generation of architects (see Fig. 13) such as Piet Louw and Martin Kruger reinvented the Cape vernacular tradition. Van der Merwe Miscewski architects have also synergised neo-Modern Movement dictates with the Cape vernacular in their Weylandts and Newlands houses in 2008. The authenticity of the Cape vernacular lives on.



Figure 13. All the same except top left: Constantia Town Hall court edge, Cape Town, Piet Louw architect (J Cooke)

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