

## Book review

Coetzer, Nicholas. 2013. *Building Apartheid and Order in Imperial Cape Town*.  
Surry, England and Burlington, USA: Ashgate.

Nicholas Coetzer acknowledges in the Preface to his book that his political education started in 1990 when as an architectural student he visited Lamontville Location – a “black” suburb of Durban. Then, for the first time, he thought of architecture as political and realised that his education was political and that even his life was political. Of course, those insights are understandable because in the early 1990s South Africa suffered states of emergency while the edifice of apartheid was being torn down.

The theme of the book is not the demise of apartheid but the construction of the foundations of this ideology, hence the title, *Building Apartheid*. Coetzer transports the reader back to the nineteenth-century Cape, brought under British control in 1806, and meticulously explains how the agents of Empire “operating through the imperatives of Empire, laid the solid foundations on which the ugly edifice of apartheid was built” (p. 13).

Who were the agents of Empire and how did they “construct Cape Town into the ordered Imperial landscape of Country/Town/Suburb and Self/Other/Same”? (13). They were Cecil John Rhodes, called “The Architect of Empire”, and Herbert Baker, an architect who arrived at the Cape in 1892. Rhodes’s patronage of Baker ensured his success during his ten year sojourn at in Cape Town and later career for which he was knighted and received the title of “Imperial Architect” in his *Times* obituary.

The English conjured a “retroactive presence, alongside the Dutch, as the original settlers of the Cape” (43). Inspired by building preservation and nationalist architectural movements in England Cape Dutch homesteads were appropriated as a common English/Afrikaner heritage. In Chapter 3, dealing with “Possessing the Land/Possessing History: Cape Dutch Architecture as a Marker of Western Civilization and the Absencing of Others”, Coetzer deals with the ideology according to which

Cape Dutch architecture, and Cape Dutch homesteads in particular, came discursively to represent and symbolize a useful take on history, civilization and culture through which White South Africans, and more directly, upper-middle-class English South Africans, made claims of possession of the land; the valorized Self was located in the countryside, through what was generally considered “high” architectural design. It was axiomatic then – and if one excluded the rural predominance of “tribal” Africa – that the Other resided in the city, literally in the slums and back alleys hidden behind the façades of polite society. (81)

During the early twentieth century the racial Others in Cape Town lived in a manner contrary to English middle class values, ie in slums, causing a visual problem that problematized the creation of aesthetic urban order based on the ideals of the English Arts and Crafts village and City Beautiful planning. Consequently slum-dwellers had to be excluded from the civilized social space of the city to prevent them from becoming a threat in the city intended to be White space. The Other, or indigenous inhabitants, came from rural areas without an urban tradition. To protect the project of Empire extreme strategies of control of where and how people had to live in Cape Town were applied that ultimately led to segregation.

The English Garden City Movement motivated slum clearance and the propagation of the English cottage as the ideal family dwelling. “Remaking African subjects of the King in his own image” (175) was the purpose of various racially segregated housing projects, such

as the Garden City project of Langa, a landmark instance of the racial reordering of the city. Finally, black urbanites became transient labourers inhabiting “Imperial Cape Town” which was “being actively produced as a White space through architecture and order” (216). On the basis of his meticulous and detailed research Coetzer concludes: “Architects and other agents of Empire were actively constructing Cape Town and South Africa into a territory of the British Empire – mapped out, ordered and remade through architecture into a landscape legitimizing their continued control and exploitation of the land and its people.”

I recommend this book to all South African architects and architectural historians who have an interest in architecture and politics. Coetzer’s revisionist research about the origins of segregation will also enlighten all South Africans about the fantasy of the “agents of Empire” with its dire consequences.

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