



# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ARCHITECTURE'S PRECOCIOUS PRODIGIES AND TWO OF SOUTH AFRICA'S OWN

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WAS IT scientific biographer Abraham Pais who wrote, 'If Einstein had stopped doing physics in the year 1925 and had gone fishing, he would be just as beloved, just as great. It would not have made a damn bit of difference?' To resort to that source of current omniscience, Wikipedia, in searching for the term 'Child Prodigies', one finds listed many mathematicians, followed by a preponderance of those, mainly male, in the sciences devoted to mathematical manipulation. Then there are the musicians, which leads me to conclude that music is liquid mathematics before frozen architecture! Thereafter, of course, are sports, games and acting, in all of which women also feature. But only one psychologist, Jean Piaget, the iconic educationalist, and no architect! The only mention of an architect is the contemporary and acclaimed starchitect, Sheilagh Sri Prakesh, but that is as a performer of

traditional Indian dance. A broader Google search of the combined term 'architect prodigy' delivers an Australian, one John James Clark (1838 – 1915), who was in public service and designing at age fourteen and had produced something memorable, aptly named the Old Treasure Building, in Melbourne, at the age of 19. He went on to live a long and productive life.

Those architects whom I am next considering here all died young – young for architects, that is – somewhere before or in their forties. Perhaps we need to distinguish between 'prodigy', a C15 noun meaning 'sign, portent, something extraordinary from which omens are drawn, from Latin *prodigium* i.e. prophetic sign, omen, portent, prodigy', but usually preceded by 'child', meaning 'child with exceptional abilities', and 'precocity' in its primary sense of 'manifesting or characterised by unusually early development or maturity, especially

in mental aptitude'. In the selection processes for candidates for studies in architecture, it must be accepted that we look for prodigies – those showing 'prophetic signs'. Thus, those of whom I here wish to write should rather then be thought of as precocious prodigies, in addition to my extra requirement of their having the misfortune of dying at a relatively young age, yet still having entered the annals of the history of architecture.

Friedrich David Gilly (1772 – 1800) was a German architect and the son of the architect David Gilly. Born in Altdamm (Dabie, today Poland), Gilly was known as a prodigy. In 1797 he travelled extensively

1. Pugin's detailing of the Houses of Parliament, London
2. Solomon's Fuller residence courtyard, University of Cape Town

in France, England and Austria where, in that same year, his design of the Frederick II Monument reveals the neoclassicism of the French influence. When in 1799 Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781 – 1841) lived in the Gilly household in Berlin, he was taught by Friedrich's architect father David Gilly and, more influentially, by his son, Friedrich Gilly, for which both are better remembered. *Gilly fils* was appointed professor at the Berlin Bauakademie at the age of 26. Of his built designs, only one survives: the ruinous Greek Revival mausoleum (1800 – 1802; mostly destroyed after 1942) at Dyhernfurth near Breslau (now Brzeg Dolny near Wrocław, Poland), which takes the form of a prostyle Greek temple.

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812 – 1852), an English architect, designer, artist and critic, was the son of the architect Auguste Pugin. He is remembered for his pioneering of the Gothic Revival, having designed many churches – most of them in England. In 1836 Pugin published *Contrasts*, a polemical book that argued for the revival of the medieval Gothic style and 'a return to the faith and the social structures of the Middle Ages'. Pugin contrasted each plate in the book with a type of urban building and a C18 equivalent – a medieval monastic foundation, for instance, where monks fed and clothed the needy, grew food in the gardens and gave the dead a decent burial, versus that of a C18 panopticon workhouse, where the poor were beaten, half starved and sent off after death for dissection i.e. Christianity versus Utilitarianism.

Both the preceding persons had fathers as mentors and teachers, so their precocity is circumstantially explicable and, in turn, they served either as teachers or polemicists, leading to their posterity.

Our next persons to consider are those who lived locally, in South Africa. Two come readily to mind.

Joseph Michael Solomon (1886 – 1920) became an assistant in Baker & Masey's Cape Town office in 1904 which, by 1903, was in the hands of Francis Edward Masey. Solomon travelled through Europe from 1911 to 1913. By about 1912, he had met with Edwin Lutyens (1869 – 1944) in London, who much impressed him; he seems to have transferred his architectural loyalties from Herbert Baker (1862 – 1956) to Edwin Lutyens around this time. On his return to South Africa in 1914, Solomon was struggling for work and asked his patron, Sir Lionel Phillips, to use his influence to obtain for him the proposed new University of Cape Town project, one coveted by many. In the interim, Solomon, ambitious and

with forceful views, became the first editor of the *Journal of the Association of Transvaal Architects*, early in 1916, but resigned as both editor and a councillor of the Association of Transvaal Architects in December 1916, in protest over the proposed registration of architects.

Edward Henry Waugh (1872 – 1948), his successor as editor, considered him a destructive critic, who adjudged him as putting forward nothing in place of that which he criticised.

Solomon, after a great deal of lobbying of his patron, and with the additional aid of the machinations of Lady Florence Phillips, was successful in being appointed as architect to the new University of Cape Town buildings in December 1917. This was surprising: he was 30 years old and relatively inexperienced, having executed very few works on which his performance might be judged. Furthermore, no competition had been held. He had, however, bitten off more than he could chew. In fact, the work grew to such proportions that Solomon became acutely anxious, particularly about the mounting costs.

In the spring of 1919 Lutyens, expressly at the invitation of the Council of the University of Cape Town, was requested to report on the plans prepared for the new buildings. Arthur James Marshall (1879 – 1955), who was assisting Solomon, collapsed from exhaustion at the volume of work. Early in 1920, Solomon wrote to Baker asking him for help. Baker sent out one of his own men, Charles Percival Walgate (1886 – 1972), then working in London on the New Delhi project, who arrived in the Cape in May 1920.

The first sod of the foundations was turned in August 1920, in the pouring rain. Solomon, troubled by sleeplessness and depression, contracted influenza. In a state of ill health and nervous strain, he shot himself in his home at The Woolsack, leaving his wife and two young children. At the time, Solomon was engaged on work for Lady Phillips at the house Vergelegen, and it is speculated that the demands made on him by Lady Phillips added to his overload of work. A sad end to a promising life.

Rex Distin Martienssen's (1905 – 1942) pioneer role in promoting modern architecture lay not so much in the work he executed, but in his articulate enthusiasm and polemical promotion in writing for the Modern Movement of his time. In 1939, Martienssen was elected president of the Institute of South African Architects; the revolutionaries were then in the palace. Between 1925 and his death in 1942, South African architects

in general and architectural students at the University of the Witwatersrand in particular were influenced by Martienssen's energetic lectures and intellectual writing that explored both classical and modern architecture. His penmanship ensured that his influence extended after his early death and provoked widespread reaction in South Africa.

In his book *The Favoured Circle*, Australian architectural sociologist Gary Steves discusses the system of architectural education, as well as everyday aspects such as the competition for reputation. He concludes that throughout history, the most eminent architects have been connected to each other by master-pupil and collegiate relations. These networks provide a mechanism for architectural influence that runs parallel to that of the university-based schools.

So we have as markers for posterity, of the precocious prodigies prematurely demised, that they have the genes and attentions of their architect fathers, or the fortunes and privileges of education and the favours of mentorship of other mature architects so beneficently disposed. They too wrote, and left written a legacy – particularly at times of revolutionary thought in the discipline of architecture; their youth and youthfulness was an advantage to the reception of ideas that were not yet part of the architectural canon or dogma.

I add my own observations and these pertain to our biology. We, in comparison with most other mammals, are born naturally premature, in the parlance of biologists showing neonatalism or arriving newly-born in a near foetal condition. It is argued that this is so that we can have what Jacob Bronowski termed 'The Long Childhood', in order that we might learn to be adults.

Architects by their very nature seem to require an even longer childhood, to 'play' at being architects so they may acquire, develop and hone the necessary social, cultural, technical and personal skills that the discipline requires.

It however begs the question that, if this is so, is the fact that it takes so long to educate and then have an architect mature in the discipline partly the circumstance of isolation from its culture in early childhood and formative adolescence? Are the cultural and educational constructs of society such that we deliberately keep the culture and practise of architecture closeted and concealed?

Or is precocity inherently an oxymoron for the discipline of architecture? All pause for thought.