

Gerard Moerdijk – The Formative Years

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In this article Moerdijk's early architectural career is paralleled with the chronological sequence of texts that express his concerns with developing an authentic South African style. In these we discover those significant aspects which are pragmatically functional – namely planning arrangements, acoustics, economy and societal well-being, geographical – namely topography, climate, available labour and materials; and cultural – namely historical events, cultural inheritance, a sense of self worth and dignity, all as reflected in the practice of religion and the conduct of civil society.

In hierdie artikel word Moerdijk se vroeë loopbaan in argitektuur parallel gestel aan die chronologiese volgorde van tekste wat sy besorgdheid ten opsigte van die ontwikkeling van 'n eg Suid Afrikaanse styl uitdruk. Hierin ontdek ons die beduidende aspekte wat pragmaties – naamlik beplanning, akoestiek, ekonomie en sosiale welstand; geografies – naamlik topografie, klimaat, beskikbare arbeid en materiale; en kultureel – naamlik historiese gebeure, kulturele erfenis, 'n sin vir eiewaarde en waardigheid, funksioneel is. Hierdie aspekte word in die beoefening van godsdiens en in die bestuur van die burgerlike samelewing weerspieël.

His early career

Gerard Leendert Pieter Moerdijk (Moerdijk)¹ (1890-1958)² has come to be either spurned³ or derided⁴ by South African architectural historians, a trend which started even before his death. His obituary in the South African Architectural Record was two lines long.⁵

In 1905 Moerdijk matriculated from Pretoria College (as the Staats Model School became, having briefly been renamed the Pretoria Boys High School in 1901). He had won a competition in his final year organized by the Public Works Department (hereafter PWD) for the design of a school and was offered a position in their offices. This was the PWD as reconstituted under British rule of the then Transvaal Colony. He joined the staff in 1906 at a salary of £10.00 (R20.00)⁶ per month. The lure of employment in a field where he could be occupied by drawing precluded the completion of his matriculation year. This he did part time.⁷ He was to remain

in their service until the end of 1909. In 1910 he left for London to study at the Architectural Association.

Early thoughts on architecture

Moerdijk proved a meritorious student, although requiring time to adjust. In his first year he was placed twenty-seventh in the class, in his second year tenth and in his third year first. A fellow graduate Geoffrey Files (son of a painter) recalls:

He was younger than we were but knew more than we did. He was, of course, damnably brilliant but he was so unapproachable.⁸

In his final year he toured the continent, spending time at the *École des Beaux Arts* and British School of Archaeology in Rome. In 1912 he returned to London for his final exams but fell ill. He, having returned to South Africa before receiving his marks, was fully expecting to have failed. The truth was otherwise. He had passed on all counts and was top student in the Empire in Classical Studies⁹.

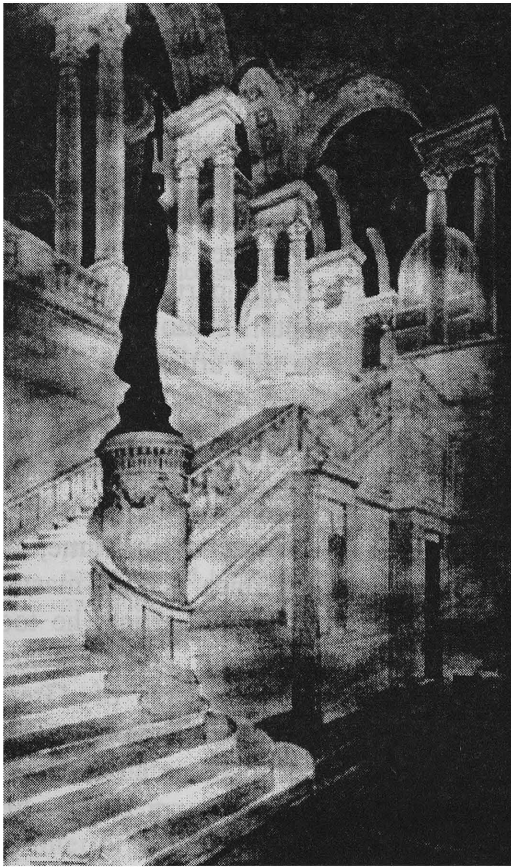


Figure 1
Student scheme

In an essay *The origin and development of the "Old Dutch" style in South Africa and its influence on the architecture there*¹⁰ Moerdijk¹¹ reflects on style in architecture. Many themes are raised to which he returns in later life.

The first theme is the nationalities of origin of the colonists. He mentions Dutch, French Huguenot and the "Indian needs and Indian tastes" of Dutch officials:

But having the choice of these three separate styles [Dutch, French and Indian] they did not adopt any one in particular but blended together the most useful features in a new style of their own. So Dutch, Belgian and French gables, Indian stoeps eaves and inlaid work, French windows and decoration are found in the same house.¹²

Secondly he discusses in the development of style the availability of materials:

The distance between this new settlement and the older countries made it imperative

that as a rule local materials should be used and to a great extent is responsible for many of the characteristic features.¹³

Thirdly he lauds the aesthetics of simplicity and good proportioning:

The greatest appeal that these houses make is their absolute simplicity indeed the 'motif' may be said to be governed by their human needs. They rely for their charm on the most important essential of all satisfactory architecture that of good proportion.¹⁴

The last of his considerations is that of ornamentation. In discussing the small houses in the province of the Transvaal he notes:

In smaller houses especially it can be seen that thought and fitness of design for required conditions alone have resulted in a natural beauty.

The limitations by which the architect was surrounded have had a great deal to do with this. He has kept his work simple, and superfluous ornament that has no message or suggestion or does not give proof of the maker's pleasure does not exist in the better class houses. There is little reason that it should for in South Africa it is difficult to create a decoration more beautiful than the play of our strong sunlight and cobalt blue shadows upon the white washed walls. With more refined work the importance of light and shadow is not so great, but here the problem set before the designer is to make the best use of the subtle colouring of varying light.

This lack of ornamentation is probably the greatest factor in the effect of restfulness apparent in much of the present day work and the realization of this is of the utmost importance to South African architecture generally.¹⁵

On qualifying Moerdijk sat the examinations to become an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (hereafter RIBA) but did not immediately register as practitioner. He returned to the services of the PWD, but this time in Cape Town. He was not to remain there for long. In 1914 the First World War (then the Great War, 1914-1918), broke out, and, with the war effort, his services were no longer required.¹⁶

It is claimed that he was recipient of the Baker Scholarship¹⁷ at the time,

but could not proceed to benefit from the sponsored trip to Rome because of the outbreak of war.¹⁸ At the time he must have used the interregnum to submit a proposal for the competition for the new parliament complex in Canberra, Australia as his name appears on a list of returned entries.¹⁹

He returned to the Transvaal, this time to the Witwatersrand, where he entered the employ of Robinson Deep Mine as a draughtsman. This move probably prompted his application for registration with the Association of Transvaal Architects. This was granted on presentation of proof of his having passed the RIBA examinations.²⁰ While with the mine he met and renewed a school-time friendship with Advocate Oswald Pirow (1890-1959),²¹ confidant and ardent supporter of Tielman Roos (1879-1935),²² the then leader of the Nationalist Party in the Transvaal. Through this friendship he was introduced to the Pirow sister, Sylva (1896-1973),²³ whom he married on 3 May 1918.



Figure 2
Cremation and the Campo Santo, final student project

Up until this time Moerdijk's writings on architecture were in English, and published in the English architectural press. The earliest drew on his European sojourn, - the topics in sequence the Palace at Versailles²⁴, "Bramante"²⁵, and "Greek History and Greek Temples"²⁶. It can be presumed that having gained confidence, he publishes his final design done at the AA, *Cremation and the Campo Santo*²⁷ (figure 2). It is interesting to note that cremation is almost anathema within rural Afrikaner Calvinist circles. The advocating of cremation, which the

article does, was thus culturally contentious. As his experience grew his published topics are more locally flavoured. His penultimate article in this phase is on woodcuts, and, while giving a historical review of the art, is illustrated from Pierneef's²⁸ portfolio.²⁹ His last article of this period in English is on the sculptor Anton Anreith³⁰ (1754-1822)³¹. In this article he alludes to the standing of Anton van Wouw, who like Anreith, 'as far as practical recognition and appreciation are concerned, seems to share the fate of his predecessor'. He was, at the time, in lodgings with his once school master and art teacher. In this article he too makes mention of the relic statuary found amongst the ruins of Great Zimbabwe. The Africanisation of his architecture was to become an enduring concern, particularly as expressed in his symbolic secular works.

Moerdijk, reformation and church architecture

In 1918 Moerdijk, in association with Frank Emley submitted for a competition a design for the Dutch Reformed Church in Bothaville, Orange Free State, which was published.³² The article states that "It was not the successful design".³³ In 1919 Moerdijk had received this as his first private commission. This was to be the first of well over eighty such commissions from the Cape to the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), from South West Africa (now Namibia) to the eastern Transvaal Lowveld (now Mpumalanga Province, South Africa). He had already broached the subject of church design as a student project at the AA.³⁴

The commission was obviously a provocative one for Moerdijk, for in 1919 he privately published a small booklet on church design, 'Kerkbou vir Suid-Afrika'³⁵. The contents were strongly recommended to the broader public by two prefaces, one by J D Kestell (1854-1941),³⁶ then editor of the

Kerkbode and staunch advocate of the use of Afrikaans rather than Dutch, whose endorsement had been solicited by his sculptor friend Anton Van Wouw.³⁷ He reflects:

We call incessantly for a new style, or attempt to replicate the old, rather than studying technical difficulties and having our own individuality come to the fore.³⁸

Moerdijk states that advocates of a new style are mistaken:

Who wants a new style? As long as we build properly, use the right materials rationally, pay due heed to our needs and reflect our own time we will in consequence have a style.³⁹

The “right” materials for the building of a church are stone, preferably quarried locally, undressed and coursed on the exterior, dressed on the interior. Ceilings should be either of gypsum or asbestos-cement boards, both other options being regarded as unsuitable by Moerdijk - pressed steel because it rusts, tongue-and-groove boarding because it shrinks and deforms. These were the traditional materials used most commonly at the time. The overriding consideration was the honesty in use of materials, and that these should, as far as was possible, be locally sourced:

Only then when it grows from our own period and out our own land will we have a style of value. Copy nothing. If we are earnest and work without fraud, if we use the best and available materials logically and find inspiration in artists who take pleasure in their creations then we will derive a style of which we can be justly proud.⁴⁰

Requirements, as Moerdijk would have them, were argued in functional and pragmatic terms. He sees proximity to the preacher as important, and that there should be a degree of equality in the arrangement of the congregation and distance from the preacher. Another consideration was the science of acoustics and he goes to some lengths to demonstrate his proficiency in

calculations in this regard. The result in is an interior plan-form that approximates a Greek theatre. Another consideration was good cross ventilation.

In his book he propagates a radical departure from traditional church planning, and one which came to characterise the planning and styling of his churches.

Moerdijk and domestic architectural styling

One of the earliest examples of Moerdijk's domestic oeuvre is in *Kerkbou vir Suid-Afrika*.⁴¹ Here he illustrates two perspectival representations of parsonages of similar planning arrangements. Even at this early time in his career he argues their suitability in topographic and climatic terms, the one – what we would now term Cape Dutch Revival – he sees as being suited to a rural and well-watered environment, the other – the other in Arts and Crafts styling – he claims as suited to a mountainous terrain.⁴² His complete oeuvre of urban dwellings designed throughout his lifetime is invariably styled in Cape Dutch revival, yet the family home of his own is in the Arts and Crafts tradition,⁴³ poised on the flank of Muckleneuk Hill.

The next examples on house design are articles in the *Boerevrou(w)*.⁴⁴ He had been preceded by an article by Pierneef who had stated that “The Cape Dutch style is definitely un-Afrikaans, since it might as well be called any style”.⁴⁵ This probably put a damper on his enthusiasm for advocating the style, for in his first article he addresses a type totally new to serious architectural expression, the *rondavel*.⁴⁶ His use as this as an example, he said, was not to glorify the type. When it came to well-planned and well-built houses then this type, he argued, had to take second place. He also considered it not to have a great future as a type, the well-designed architectural home eventually

replacing its current use as farmhouses. However, when the matter was economic necessity it was a type to be strongly considered. So, in pragmatic terms, he advises the use of available materials and unschooled black labour, and again advocates climatic considerations.

His follow-up article is a lesson in design theory since he considers design composition in the modulation of arrangement and size of the rondavels by way of sketched illustrations.⁴⁷ But he returns to functional arguments. One must put in a concrete foundation, otherwise one has wasted effort and money since the walls will burst, the damp will rise and the termites will attack the timbers.

But we are to meet his examples of the Cape Dutch variant again in the pages of *Die Boerevrou*, this time more extensively argued. Here he moralizes as to the character of neighbourhoods being determined by the quality of their houses. Bad houses make for bad neighbourhoods and bad neighbourhoods breed bad characters.

There are great personages who through circumstance have been raised in deprived neighbourhoods, and always their first striving is to escape this oppressive influence.⁴⁸

Was this perhaps an covert reference to his own changed social status, his own family having to endure straitened circumstances in a tent in Villieria, Pretoria, after their incarceration in the Standerton concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer (South African) War?⁴⁹

An Early Monument

Moerdijk⁵⁰ broached the topic of the national value of memorials in a speech delivered at the unveiling of the Klerksdorp *Vrouemonument* (Women's Monument, figure 3) on 16 December 1920. In his speech he attests: "We must learn to reflect our own history

and character".⁵¹

The message was that while the Romans had had their Empire, it was the Greeks, as architects to the Romans, who were remembered. So too, when in time it was forgotten who the rulers were in South Africa, let history attest that it was the Afrikaner who did her great works. How might this be done?

Take raw granite and write on it with unadorned letters, but do it oneself as nation, and that will reflect us with greater purity than imported cherubs.⁵²

The reference to "unadorned letters" is poignant, particularly under the circumstances of recent memory of the concentration camps. They remind their audience of gray slate headstones carved in simple script in the distant veld on the graves of the host of war-dead women and children of the Anglo-Boer (South African) War.

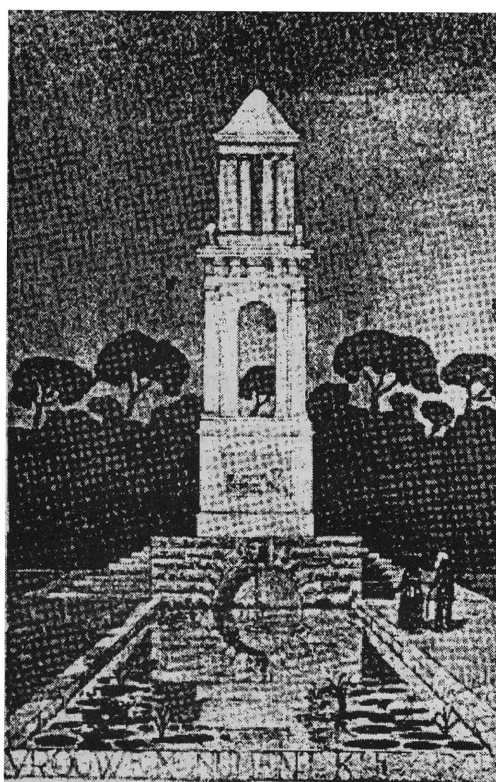


Figure 3
Vrouemonument Klerksdorp,
design drawing 1921

Decisive Events

The year 1920, by all accounts, seems to have been decisive for Moerdijk's future career. Firstly, in 1920 he applied for Associate membership of RIBA, one of his witnesses being Frank Emley (1868-1938)⁵³ who had known Moerdijk since 1913. Secondly, encouraged by Emley,⁵⁴ Moerdijk applied for, and was awarded, a Carnegie research bursary in 1919. Its value was for two-hundred-and-fifty pounds [five hundred Rands] from the School of Mines and Technology, tenable for the year 1920 to undertake research in the Cape on the topic *The investigation and delineation of historic Cape building* (cf. figure 4). D. M. Burton⁵⁵ was his appointed supervisor. W. J. Delbridge (1878-1946)⁵⁶ wrote from Cape Town, "I am sufficiently aware of his powers as a draughtsman to endorse the suggested selection".

While Moerdijk was in Cape Town, Emley won the University competition and Burton wrote to Moerdijk saying that he wished Moerdijk were in Johannesburg to help.

The study was forwarded to the High Commissioner's office in London with a view to publication but Pearse,⁵⁷ himself a later recipient of a Carnegie grant, records its unfortunate loss or destruction.

Moerdijk returned to Johannesburg at the end of 1920 and set up independent practice there.

Irma Vermeulen⁵⁸ relates that it was in these years back in Johannesburg, that Moerdijk was faced with the decision whether to ally himself with the English or Afrikaans public. It was also in this year that he was approached to join the Afrikaner Broederbond (Fraternity).⁵⁹ Moerdijk was elected an Associate member of the RIBA in January of 1921.⁶⁰



Figure 4
Carnegie bursary photograph of Cape Dutch gateway (Stellenbosch?) 1920

In 1924 he moved with his family to, and opened offices in Pretoria.

Moerdijk's initial architectural concerns were within the context of a broader South African rather than a narrower Afrikaner Nationalist allegiance. Climatic constraints were Moerdijk's first concerns, followed by the use of local resources – material, labour and skill - all employed in proper and durable fashion. This makes him, after Baker and his 'school', forebear of the regionalist tradition. At the age of thirty the events of his personal history and political associations through his wife, Sylva, were beginning to fuse and prepare him as the central figure in creating an architecture that embodied and symbolized Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies and aspirations.

Notes

1 The Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns had its origins with the National Convention in 1909 (see Potgieter, 1970: 271) and was later established as a statutory body in terms of Act no. 23 of 1921. The third edition of the *Afrikaanse Woordelys en spelreëls* (Bosman, Le Roux & Malherbe, 1921), which appeared in that year - and hence had the authority of law - regularized in Afrikaans the spelling of the Dutch 'ij' to be replaced by 'y'. The spelling of other words encountered in this article such as 'architek' (architect) and 'boerevrou' (woman farmer, although it could be understood as the farmer's wife or the Female Boer) were thereafter regularized as 'argitek' and 'boerevrou'. However, although the printed spelling of Moerdyk changed, Irma Vermeulen (1999: 126)

- states that, while his wife Sylva preferred the Afrikamerised version, he himself never formally changed the spelling of his name. In this article, where referred, the version of spelling is cited as published.
- 2 Walker (work in progress) in her entry *Moerdyk, Gerard Leendert Pieter* provides the best researched architectural biography. See also Cooper ([1973]) and Roodt (1977) for architectural socio-cultural - and Vermeulen (1999) for personal and familial biographical information. In this article there are primary sources cited additional to those in these works which broadens the published bibliography for future researchers.
 - 3 Doreen Greig (1971: 45, 168, 202, 212), while mentioning his churches, fails even to include the Voortrekker Monument.
 - 4 Désirée Picton-Seymour (1989: 162) writes of the Voortrekker Monument as his '*most notorious creation*', more recently David Bunn '*South Africa's most notorious memorial, the Voortrekker Monument*,' (104 [miniscule numerals in upper centre of pages]); Jooste (2000: 83): *In retrospect he created empty monuments to misplaced aspirations. These nationalist dreams were unconsciously rendered in the nightmarish language of Kafka and Giorgio de Chirico. Perhaps, contrary to intentions, Moerdijk created artefacts true to his place at the time in Africa – empty and imperfect.*
 - 5 Howie, 1958: 40
 - 6 Rand values are the direct exchange value at the time of decimalization of sterling currency in 1960. Adjustment should be made for inflation.
 - 7 Cooper, s. a. [1973]: 7
 - 8 In Holloway (1959)
 - 9 Cooper, s. a. [1973]: 18
 - 10 Certain phrases - such as reference to the Union Buildings as being presently under construction which was in the period 1910-1912 - lead one to believe that the document was composed as a paper while in London (s. n. [Moerdijk, G], sa[1910-13]: sp).
 - 11 Moerdyk [s. n.], s. a. [1910-13], s. p.
 - 12 Moerdyk [s. n.], s. a. [1910-13], s. p.
 - 13 Moerdyk [s. n.], s. a. [1910-13], s. p.
 - 14 Moerdyk [s. n.], s. a. [1910-13], s. p.
 - 15 Moerdyk [s. n.], s. a. [1910-13], s. p.
 - 16 Vermeulen, 1999: 36-37.
 - 17 The Baker Scholarship was inaugurated by Baker on his Departure from South Africa in 1913 as a bursary to be awarded in competition to promising young architects to be sent to the British School of Archaeology in Rome (Wallace-Hadrill, 2001). His school friend and occasional professional associate and sometimes rival Gordon Leith was the first recipient.
 - 18 Vermeulen, 1999: 36-37.
 - 19 *I found Moerdyk's name listed in the register of participants for the Parliament Buildings competition (abandoned owing to WWI). Unfortunately, its just a list stating to whom submissions were returned. So, the trail goes back to SA. eg do his drawings survive in some archival collection? Perhaps an unidentified drawing actually records his proposal for the Australian government buildings!* (Vernon, 2002)
 - 20 Application for Registration, 1916: 34.
 - 21 See Scholtz, 1981: 594-596.
 - 22 See K[leynhans], 1968: 679-681.
 - 23 See Pretorius, 1981: 513-515.
 - 24 Moerdijk, 1917a, pp. 109-110; [illustration s.p. between 112-113].
 - 25 Moerdijk, 1917b: pp. [74, illustration] 75.
 - 26 Moerdijk, 1917c: pp. 40-41
 - 27 Moerdijk, 1918: 211-213.
 - 28 Pierneef, Jacob Hendrik (1886-1957) (Werth, 1981: 458-460). He was a school fellow and friend of Moerdijk's.
 - 29 Moerdijk, 1919: 320-323.
 - 30 Moerdijk, 1920: 417-418.
 - 31 See Meintjies, 1951; 26-29; De Bosdari, 1954; Pearce, 1959: 43-48; Bradlow, 1977: 25-28.
 - 32 Design for Church, 1918: illustration between 138-139.
 - 33 Our Illustration, 1918: 147.
 - 34 'Projek uit sy studiejare' entitled "Study for a small village church" (Cooper, [1973]: 9).
 - 35 Moerdijk, s. n. [1919]
 - 36 See P. J. N[ienaber], 1968: 421-425.
 - 37 Vermeulen, 1999: 43.
 - 38 *Aanhoudend roep ons uit na 'n nuwe styl, of ons probeer 'n oue na te maak, in plek van tegniese moeilikheid te bestudeer en ons individualiteit op die voorgrond te laat kom.* (Moerdijk, s. a. [1919]: s. p.)
 - 39 *Wie wil sodanig 'n nuwe styl he? Solank ons deeglik bou, die regte materiale rasideel gebruik, ons behoeftes in ag neem en ons eie periode weergee sal ons van self 'n styl kry.* (Moerdijk, s. a. [1919]: s. p.)

40 *Alleen dan kan ons 'n styl van waarde kry wanneer dit 'n groeie is uit ons eie tydperk en uit ons eie land. Kopier [sic] niks nie. [...] as ons ernstig en sonder bedrog werk, as ons die beste en geskikte materiale logies gebruik en as ons geïnspireer word deur kunstenaars wat genoeg in hulle skeppinge neem sal ons 'n styl kry waar met reg trots op kan wees.* (Moerdijk, s. a. [1919]: s. p.)

41 Moerdijk, s. a. [1919]: s. p.

42 Moerdijk, s. a. [1919]: s. p.

43 See Minnaar and Holm, 1998: 35-52.

44 The Boerevrou, one of the early Afrikaans women's magazines, was established in 1919 under editorship of Mabel Malherbe (1879-1964) (Pretorius, 1981: 344-345), and published its final edition in December of 1931. His wife, Sylva, was also a contributor.

45 *Die Kaaps-Hollandse boustyl is beslis on-Afrikaans, want dit kan net sowel enige styl genoem word.* (Pierneef, 1920: 3)

46 Moerdijk, 1920: 21-23.

47 Moerdijk, 1921: 18-19.

48 *Daar is groot mense wat deur omstandighede, in minderwaardige buurte opgegroeie het, maar hulle eerste strewe is altyd om weg te kom van die teneerdrukkende invloed.* (Moerdijk, 1923:11)

49 Holloway, 1959: 4.

50 Moerdijk, 1921: 164-165.

51 *Ons moet leer om ons eie geskiedenis en karakter weer te gee.*

52 *Nee! Ons bestaan uit sterker stof. Vat 'n ruwe klomp granite en skryf 'n opskrif daarop in onbewerkte letters, maar doen dit self as nasie, en dit sal ons suiwerder weergee as die ingevoerde engeltjies.*

53 Walker, work in progress: 'Emley, Jack'.

54 Walker has the following entry 'Emley & Moerdijk, the partnership between F Emley and G Moerdijk circa 1918. Emley encouraged Moerdijk to undertake his research in the Cape and put forward Moerdijk's name for a bursary which Moerdijk was awarded in order to carry out his research on the architecture of the Cape. They collaborated on the Dutch Reformed church at Bothaville in 1918 and submitted a design for the Benoni Town Hall competition in 1918. Contract documents exist, dated 1923, for Emley and Moerdijk to design a house in Forest Town, Johannesburg which perhaps refer to Moerdijk's own house in Forest Town.

55 Walker, work in progress: 'Burton, D. M.'

56 Walker, work in progress: 'Delbridge, William

John'.

57 Pearse, 1933: p. vii.

58 Vermeulen, 1999: 48.

59 Vermeulen, 1999: 49.

60 Walker, [Work in progress]: 'Moerdijk.'

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