
RONDAVELS: FROM MAMELODI TO THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

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‘Rondavels: From Mamelodi to the presidential library and archives’ considers the recently unveiled architectural design of the first presidential library on the African continent, the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library. It focuses on its positive reception in South Africa, Africa, and abroad against the backdrop of the history of the *lapa* scheme and the Mamelodi rondavels established in the late 1940s. The article questions whether the vehement rejection of the Mamelodi rondavels by the local community and the recent positive reception of the presidential library indicates an evolved appreciation of African indigenous knowledge systems and design. It also questions whether such an interpretation of the use of traditional architectural forms is feasible. The amalgamation and adaptation of African indigenous knowledge systems into modernity as part of the African Renaissance project championed by Mbeki and the promotion of Africans’ sense of self and self-definition are critical objectives of the library project. The article investigates whether a modernisation of African traditional design for contemporary sensibilities might be an evolution over time reflecting the development of an awareness of the rich and complex heritage connecting South Africa to the rest of Africa and its peoples; or whether it reflects a deeper appreciation of the connections between South Africa, the rest of the African continent and the world.

Keywords: African heritage, African Renaissance project, architectural design, culture, history, Mamelodi rondavels, presidential library and archives, Thabo Mbeki

Rondawels: Van Mamelodi na die presidensiële biblioteek en argief

‘Rondawels: Van Mamelodi na die presidensiële biblioteek en argief’ besin oor die onlangse onthulling van die argitektoniese ontwerp van die eerste presidensiële biblioteek op die Afrika-kontinent, die Thabo Mbeki presidensiële biblioteek.

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Dit fokus op die positiewe ontvangs daarvan in Suid-Afrika, Afrika en oorsee teen die agtergrond van die geskiedenis van die *lapa*-skema en die Mamelodi-rondawels wat in die laat 1940's ontstaan het. Die artikel stel die vraag of die plaaslike gemeenskap se heftige verwerping van die Mamelodi-rondawels op daardie tydstip en die onlangse positiewe ontvangs van die presidensiële biblioteek 'n aanduiding van 'n evolusie in die waardering van inheemse kennisstelsels en ontwerpe in Afrika is. Dit ondersoek ook of so 'n interpretasie van die gebruik van tradisionele argitektoniese vorms lewensvatbaar is. Die samesnoering en toepassing van inheemse Afrikakennisstelsels in die moderne tyd as deel van die Afrika-renaissanceprojek wat deur Mbeki voorgestaan is en die verandering in Afrikane se sin van self en selfdefinisie is onder meer deel van die biblioteekprojek se doelwitte. Is die modernisering van tradisionele ontwerpe vir eietydse gebruik moontlik 'n langdurige evolusie van bewuswording van Suid-Afrika se ryk en ingewikkelde nalatenskap aan die res van Afrika en sy mense; of weerspieël hierdie evolusie 'n dieper waardering vir die verbintenis van Suid-Afrika met die res van die Afrika-kontinent en die wêreld?

Sleutelwoorde: Afrika-nalatenskap, Afrika-renaissanceprojek, argitektoniese ontwerp, geskiedenis, kultuur, Mamelodi rondawels, presidensiële biblioteek en argief, Thabo Mbeki



Figure 1: The Mamelodi Rondavels in 2011, after having been renovated.
(Photo by author)

Introduction

Shortly after the University of Pretoria incorporated the Mamelodi Campus of the erstwhile Vista University in 2004,² Prof Karel Bakker introduced the author to what Bakker considered “a wonderful place” in Mamelodi: the Mamelodi rondavels. The site known by this name consists of a collection of 14 rondavels that were erected in 1947³ with the intention that they should be the prototype for the first housing units for black residents on the farm Vlakfontein. This new township would be named Mamelodi in 1961 by the then South African government.⁴ According to the article by Bakker and others, published in the *South African Journal of Cultural History* in 2003, the first buildings that were erected for the Pretoria Bantu Normal College (hereafter PBNC) were the Mamelodi rondavels. The rondavel complex was used as offices and classrooms. Still, when a block of single-story classrooms, which are now part of Mogale School, north of the rondavels, and some brick houses for teachers were built in the early 1950s, the rondavel complex was transformed into a students’ residence for the PBNC. At the same time, several buildings were also erected adjacent to the PBNC for the Vlakfontein Industrial School, which was established in 1948.⁵ At the time, the rondavel housing scheme, known as the *lapa* scheme, was rejected by the Vlakfontein residents and community, who, among other things, “consider[ed] it retrogressive to construct buildings of such a primitive nature”.⁶ Through his research and involvement in heritage conservation work, Bakker helped to advocate for national heritage status for the Mamelodi rondavels,⁷ which he considered a

2 *Government Gazette*, No. 25737, Incorporation of the Mamelodi Campus of Vista University with the University of Pretoria, 2003-11-14.

3 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’ as place in the formative period of Bantu Education and in Vlakfontein (Mamelodi West), *South African Journal of Cultural History* 17(2), 2003, p 4.

4 RM Ralinala, “Urban apartheid and African responses: Aspects of life in Mamelodi township, 1953-1990” (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town), 2002, p 26; K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’ ..., p 4.

5 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’ ..., p 4.

6 South Africa Press Association, Native objections to Vlakfontein housing plans, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1947-09-19, p 12.

7 ET Smith collection (ETSC), E-mail correspondence with Noluthando Cembi (Provincial Heritage Resource Authority – Gauteng) by ET Smith (University of Pretoria). According to the Gauteng Department of Sports, Arts, Culture & Recreation, the nomination for the Mamelodi Rondavels was submitted in 2018 and was declared in September 2018 under Section 29 of the National Heritage Resources Act 23 of 1999 as Grade II heritage site. A site inspection was conducted by the PHRA-G’s Declarations Committee in October 2019, and it was noted that the site is burnt down and is in a state of disrepair. The Mamelodi Rondavels remain Provisionally Declared to date: 2022-02-17.

remarkable feature and achievement in the Mamelodi community.⁸ Sadly, Bakker passed away on 19 November 2014 at the height of his academic prowess as Head of the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria.⁹

Partly inspired by Bakker's enthusiasm for the Mamelodi rondavels and their place in the Mamelodi township and South African city and planning historiography, the author studied the history of post-secondary education institutions in Mamelodi. The study commenced with the Mamelodi rondavels, which housed the PBNC and the *Kolege Ya Bana Ba Afrika*, established in 1947 and 1945, respectively, as the first post-secondary education institutions in Mamelodi.¹⁰ Both the Normal (as the PBNC was colloquially referred to) and the *Kolege* were closed in 1959 to create the University of the North (Turfloop) as part of the paradoxically named Extension of University Education Act No. 45 of 1959. The aim of this "was to provide training for 'non-European' students in their own separate, tertiary facilities, who would then graduate to provide skilled personnel to work in their own racial areas".¹¹ It would bolster the implementation of the separate development policy of apartheid by creating black Bantustan homelands by the Nationalist Party government. After eleven years, the PBNC was closed, and the *Kolege* dissolved on 31 December 1959.¹²

In 2020 the former South African President Thabo Mbeki and the Ghanaian-British Pan-African architect, Sir David Adjaye, unveiled the design of the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library. With designs inspired by African rondavel huts, this first presidential library on the African continent received great public applause. "Speakers at the unveiling of the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library architectural design ... lauded the library as being a home for all African connection, which will

8 KA Bakker, RC de Jong, & A Matlou, History and documentation of the Mamelodi rondavels (Unpublished research report by Cultmatrix cc for the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, 2002; K Bakker *et al*, The 'Mamelodi Rondavels' ..., p 6.

9 According to UNESCO, "Prof. Bakker contributed to numerous World Heritage missions, Heritage Impact Assessments, training workshops, meetings, and publications, which raised the bar high for heritage conservation, especially in the Africa region. He was instrumental in developing and raising awareness about the Historic Urban Landscape approach, which was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference as a 'Recommendation' in November 2011. Karel will be greatly missed by the World Heritage Centre and by the World Heritage community, who have looked to him for guidance and inspiration over the years". <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1202>, viewed 2020-11-20.

10 ET Smith, "Throwing the bones: postsecondary education in Mamelodi: 1947 to 1917" (MA dissertation, University of Pretoria), 2021.

11 V Noble, *A School of Struggle: Durban's medical school and the education of black doctors in South Africa*, (Scottsville, 2013), p 83.

12 K Bakker *et al*, The 'Mamelodi Rondavels' ..., p 6.



Figure 2: Architectural rendering of the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library.
(Source: Courtesy of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation)

allow the continent to write its history”.¹³ The Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library is the “anchor project of the ambitious R950 million Thabo Mbeki Presidential Centre (TMPC) heritage precinct in Riviera, Johannesburg”.¹⁴ The TMPC, set to open by mid-2024, will be situated near the cultural hub of Rosebank and the Sandton CBD.¹⁵ The presidential library will comprise an archive, a library, gardens, commercial mixed-use space, and the Mbeki House as a living museum.¹⁶ Sir David Adjaye confirmed that his design was inspired by “his obsession with African history, artifacts, and research on the continent”. Furthermore, “aspects from the map of Africa to the huts, tombs, and farmhouses went into how the library will look”.¹⁷ Presidential libraries are an American creation,¹⁸ with controversy

13 B Pheto, Thabo Mbeki library will house African leaders’ papers & artefacts, *Times Live*, 2020-11-20.

14 A Mackenzie, Ambitious living museum precinct planned for Joburg, *Southern & East African Tourism Update*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.tourismupdate.co.za/article/ambitious-living-museum-precinct-planned-joburg>, viewed 2022-01-31.

15 A Mackenzie, Ambitious living museum precinct..., 2021-10-22.

16 A Mackenzie, Ambitious living museum precinct..., 2021-10-22.

17 B Pheto, Thabo Mbeki library will house..., *Times Live*, 2020-11-20.

18 DW Wilson, Presidential libraries: Developing to maturity, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21(4), 1991, p 771.

and contestation in their country of origin. However, this first translation of the concept in Africa relies on the traditional African architectural design form of the rondavel to mediate, in a modern context, an invention for the promotion of African identity, sense of self, and the rise of a common heritage and history in South Africa and on the continent. These recent developments around indigenous knowledge systems and design raised several questions this article seeks to explore.



Figure 3: Wakanda in the movie “Black Panther”©Walt Disney Co.
(Source: Courtesy Everett Collection)

Furthermore, the rondavel design recently also enjoyed visibility in other contexts. The Marvel blockbuster movie *Black Panther*, which was its “most successful movie in the US in the studio’s cinematic history by making US\$1.3 billion worldwide”,¹⁹ featured rondavel designs for Wakanda, the futuristic city in the film. Hannar Beachler, the production designer on the US\$200 million movie, reports that the “afro-futurist architecture featured in [the] hit movie *Black Panther* is an unexpected blend of British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid and Buckingham Palace”.²⁰ However, the “Zaha-style curves were then combined with southern African

19 A Abad-Santos, 2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel’s future, *Vox.com*, 2018-12-11, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel>, viewed 2021-09-07.

20 G Yalcinkaya, Black Panther’s ‘voluptuous’ sets are influenced by Zaha Hadid, says production designer, *Dezeen.com*, 2018-03-01, <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/03/01/black-panther-film-designer-zaha-hadid/>, viewed 2021-09-09.

architectural references, such as the traditional rondavel huts that feature conical, thatched roofs, visible in the design of the skyscrapers in Wakanda's Golden City capital".²¹ Furthermore, the "film has triggered renewed interest in afro-futurism: a cultural movement that combines African and African diaspora culture with technology and science fiction elements".²² For Bleacher, the "afro-futurism aesthetic was really about blending things that were existing in a lot of different African cultures and then creating them as if they had evolved and inserting that into [*Black Panther's*] fictional nation".²³ Closer to home, the private estate of former South African President Jacob Zuma at Nkandla represents an ostentatious interpretation of the rondavel hut design aspiring to grand stature in both design and magnitude. Unfortunately, the estimated "R246 million"²⁴ Nkandla estate has led to investigations of impropriety and corruption,²⁵ which have greatly overshadowed their architectural magnificence in the public imagination and discourse.

In the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library project, one of the continent's champions of the African Renaissance²⁶ partnered with one of Africa's most distinguished modern architects to design and establish an institution with tremendous implications for shaping the meaning and sense of self of Africa and Africans. This sense of occasion and possibilities warrant closer examination to understand whether the presidential library design marks the stubborn perseverance of the rondavel as an African architectural design form and a watershed for the new assertion of Africanism in the form of the current efforts around decolonisation that seeks to redefine and recast Africa in the world. Consequently, the central concern here is to understand the meaning and implication of the rejection of the rondavel design in one context and the grand reception of the design in another context within the same country and among the same people.

21 G Yalcinkaya, Black Panther's 'voluptuous' sets..., *Dezeen.com*, 2018-03-01.

22 G Yalcinkaya, Black Panther's 'voluptuous' sets..., *Dezeen.com*, 2018-03-01.

23 G Yalcinkaya, Black Panther's 'voluptuous' sets..., *Dezeen.com*, 2018-03-01.

24 K Mahr, Zuma told to repay R7.8m spent on estate in 'Nkandlagate' scandal: South Africa treasury sets out sum president must repay after court ruling on upgrades to homestead, *Financial Times*, 2016-06-27, <https://www.ft.com/content/df7cd1b6-3c83-11e6-8716-a4a71e8140b0>, viewed 2021-08-18.

25 T Madonsela, Secure in comfort: Report on an investigation into allegations of impropriety and unethical conduct relating to the installation and implementation of security measures by the Department of Public Works at and in respect of the private residence of President Jacob Zuma at Nkandla in the KwaZulu-Natal province, *Public Protector's Report No: 25 of 2013/14*, 2014-3, p 4.

26 T Mbeki, The African renaissance, South Africa and the world, in T Mbeki, *Africa: The time has come: Selected speeches*, (Johannesburg, 1998), pp 239-251.



Figure 4: Former President Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead.
(Source: *Sunday Times - Timeslive*. Image: Thembinkosi Dwayisa)

The apartheid architects and planners attempted to achieve emotional resonance with the urbanising black population in Mamelodi at the commencement of National Party domination. The codification of apartheid and separate development was rejected.²⁷ This historical moment in the life of the Mamelodi community prompts questions regarding the meaning of the modern-day incorporation of the rondavel architectural design form in the presidential library concept. Consequently, is the current positive reception and view of incorporating African design forms in creating physical spaces and institutions that resonate, reflect, and promote an African identity and sense of self and self-worth a harbinger of positive evolution of the appreciation of African indigenous knowledge systems and design forms? Was what we were witnessing in the local and international excitement regarding the design of the presidential library an evolved sense of self among Africans? Is the persistent and uncompromising survival of the rondavel design a salient feature of the durability of African indigenous knowledge systems in the modern context?

27 K Bakker *et al*, The 'Mamelodi Rondavels' ..., p 3.

The rondavel as an indomitable African architectural form

In making a case for the preservation of rondavels as an African design form, Gerald Steyn of the Department of Architecture, Tshwane University of Technology, notes that “[o]pen living areas and cattle pens surrounded by thatched round huts, commonly referred to as rondavels, is the form generally associated with traditional South African architecture.”²⁸ Steyn further reports that a variety of early nineteenth-century travellers into South Africa’s interior’s depictions, and subsequent archaeological evidence, showed that most indigenous communities in the area lived in compounds. They consisted of cattle kraals, open living spaces, and several one-roomed thatched round huts with mud walls. Furthermore, these huts are described in the literature as “cone-on-cylinder or cone on drum”,²⁹ but are popularly referred to simply as rondavels in South Africa. The rondavel dominated the pre-colonial landscape and remained the popular perception of indigenous settlement in the area.³⁰

In his 2006 survey of rondavels and their ubiquitousness on the African continent, Steyn found that the rondavel was still prevalent in rural areas in the country. Furthermore, there are rondavels in southern Africa, and they are also a substantial part of sub-Saharan Africa. Macdonald professor of Architecture at McGill School of Architecture, Norbert Schoenauer, in 1952, described the “typical African round-hut compound dwelling [as] a cluster of round huts facing an enclosed central courtyard”.³¹ In more recent times, the rondavel has frequently existed alongside

...thatched and flat-roofed rectangular buildings in rural areas and, in rare instances, even in informal settlements near urban areas. It currently often informs architectural concepts for chalets and lodges in tourist resorts, albeit in a mutated mode, in an attempt to capture the atmosphere of Africa.³²

For Steyn, when considering “the prevalence and resilience of the indigenous rondavel-dwelling, it is perhaps not surprising that the City Council of Pretoria built a so-called *lapa* scheme in Mamelodi West in 1947, consisting of rondavels around a centralised space, emulating traditional Tswana dwelling forms”.³³

28 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel – a case for conservation, *South African Journal of Art History* 21(10), 2006, p 21.

29 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel..., p 21.

30 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel..., p 21.

31 N Schoenauer, *6 000 years of housing* (revised and expanded edition), (New York, 2000), p 62.

32 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel..., p 21.

33 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel..., p 24.

Steyn also reports that, while there are no statistics available to confirm his suspicions, the number of rondavels, nonetheless, is undoubtedly declining, hence the need to advocate for a deliberate intervention to preserve these African design forms. Architectural anthropologist Paul Oliver, on the other hand, suggests that the decline is “under urban influence”, and that a rectangular unit replaces the rondavels.³⁴ Steyn postulates that “urban influence” has three facets: 1: Urbanisation, as people abandon their rural existence for one in towns and cities; 2: The adoption of industrial technologies in rural areas, particularly corrugated iron, which has led to the development of the flat-roofed Highveld dwelling with its mud or masonry walls; and 3: The vast majority of South Africa’s citizens, rich and poor, aspire to the Western-style freestanding suburban house.³⁵

Steyn posits that “[t]he indigenous rondavel is unquestionably a remarkably robust type and has been a major presence in the landscape – and, by implication, in the indigenous knowledge system that has been shaping the South African built environment”.³⁶ Furthermore, the prevalence of the rondavel has been widely commented on. According to Schoenauer “rondavels are found as far away as China”.³⁷ A map by the author of pioneering studies of the vernacular architecture of many countries in Africa, Europe, and the Far East, James Walton, shows that the rondavel was dominant in about 66% of sub-Saharan Africa.³⁸ In the 1950s, Walton writes that this diffusion and migration largely explains the wide distribution of the rondavel built form but adds that climate, ecology, and geography were also “controlling” influences.³⁹ Finally, architect Franco Frescura describes the rondavel as “possibly the most universal of southern Africa’s house forms”.⁴⁰ The rondavel formed part of a mature set of cultural and technological customs of the indigenous peoples of southern Africa “consisting of their language, their knowledge of farming, herding, pottery and metallurgy, their belief system, music and clay figurines and ... their architecture”.⁴¹ While “the rondavel in its purest form evolved from the domed hut nearly 3 000 years ago in West Africa”, Frescura points out that “in the Limpopo and Zambezi valleys it developed into the veranda rondavel about 1 000 years ago”.⁴²

34 P Oliver, *Dwellings: the house across the world*, (Oxford, 1987), p 185.

35 G Steyn, *The indigenous rondavel...*, pp 24-25.

36 G Steyn, *The indigenous rondavel...*, p 25.

37 N Schoenauer, *6 000 years of housing*, (New York, 2000), p 58.

38 J Walton, *African village*, (Pretoria, 1956), p 128.

39 J Walton, *African village*, (Pretoria, 1956), p 128.

40 F Frescura, *Rural shelter in southern Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1981), p 53.

41 A Rapoport, *House form and culture*, (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), pp 8-11.

42 F Frescura, *Rural shelter in southern Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1981) p 81.

The role of urbanisation in the evolution of the use and design of dwellings is a more complex issue. World Heritage Adviser Susan Denyer points out that:

...in parts of Africa, for example, the Chad Basin, rural houses were traditional thatched round huts, while urban housing was cuboid. Apart from the fact that many rural people undeniably admired the rectangular Western forms, which they regarded as progressive, the rondavel form is simply geometrically more suited to rural situations.⁴³

Though Steyn fears that:

...industrial-era technologies, Western influences, and urbanisation are all contributing to the transformation of the pure archetype, which could in due course, disappear totally, ... the rondavel is such a remarkable type that there seems to be a need to audit the existing body of theoretical knowledge, identify areas for further research and preserve some representative examples, as well as the skills to construct and maintain them.⁴⁴

Bakker and other authors noted the significance of the Mamelodi rondavels and *lapa* scheme as historical markers of “an ideologically inspired intention that was nipped in the bud through public defiance – as well as of the intention of fixing ‘African’ cultural values in the design”.⁴⁵ Local citizens also had their views about the rondavels: BB Mdledle notes the city’s attempt to “resolve the Native housing problem and at the same time enable the city to abandon its sub-economic housing commitments in respect of Africans”. However, Mdledle lists several disadvantages in the rondavel housing scheme design. Mdledle concludes that because “[t]o some minds the Native must be a Native in every respect [and consequently] it is a pity to spoil him by initiating him in the White man’s way of life. It is this mentality that the Natives will oppose with all the power at their disposal”.⁴⁶ JW Macquarrie, on the other hand, hails “the scheme with enthusiasm”, after listing several challenges of housing provision across the country. For Macquarrie “[a]ny educated and thoughtful African who allows his representatives to foment strife, or to make political capital out of such worthy efforts to improve social

43 S Denyer, *African traditional architecture*, (New York, 1978), p 165.

44 G Steyn, *The indigenous rondavel...*, p 35.

45 K Bakker *et al.* *The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’...*, p 20.

46 BB Mdledle, Pretoria Mud-hut Townships: Shanty-towns or Rondavels, *The South African Outlook*, 1 October 1947, p 160.

conditions, is surely doing a disservice to his people”.⁴⁷ Bakker and other authors acknowledge that “[t]he history of the Mamelodi rondavels also opens up a new avenue of research surrounding cultural perceptions of the rondavel typology”⁴⁸ because there was a significant contestation around the Mamelodi rondavel scheme.

The Mamelodi rondavels⁵¹

The Mamelodi rondavels is an early example of indigenous architectural design forms in a public housing infrastructure project, albeit the design was scrapped. In investigating the “‘Mamelodi rondavels’ as part of a Municipal ecotourism project to determine their heritage value and conservation potential”, Bakker and other authors found that “[t]he retention of the heritage place, defined by a small group of rondavel style buildings, is important because it exists as a significant visual local remnant of the history of Bantu Education and the subsequent struggle for a non-discriminatory, non-racial society.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the “Mamelodi rondavels [were] not only the oldest known buildings in Mamelodi, but they may also be understood as symbols of apartheid, its accompanying education ideology and, from an architectural and town planning perspective, its accompanying town planning ideology.”⁵⁰ Their study concluded that the Mamelodi rondavels represent the “first municipal attempts at a housing project in the eastern side of Vlaktefontein, which is of particular interest to fully understand the cultural significance of the Mamelodi rondavels”.⁵¹

Walker and other authors report how the municipality decided on the *lapa* design for the Vlaktefontein Native Location (Mamelodi) settlement. Accordingly, the City Council of Pretoria officials visited Botswana in 1946 “to look at what they considered to be typical, indigenous housing types that might be suitably adapted for the proposed housing programme at Vlaktefontein”.⁵² Following the visit,

...about fifty rondavels were designed as a copy of a traditional Tswana dwelling form. They were set in simulated “traditional” *lapa* spaces and placed in rows around a hierarchically focused or centralised space, which was thought that such a layout would induce sociological patterns parallel

47 JW Macquarrie, Pretoria Mud-hut Townships: Shanty-towns or Rondavels, *The South African Outlook*, 1 October 1947, p 160.

48 K Bakker *et al.* The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 20.

49 K Bakker *et al.* The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 1.

50 K Bakker *et al.* The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 1.

51 K Bakker *et al.* The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 3.

52 J Walker *et al.* A working history of Mamelodi..., p 17.

to the tribal system and so minimize the sometimes disastrous effects of the removal of tribal authority [among blacks] in urban areas.⁵³

By September 1947, two months before the Mamelodi rondavels were built, a “large section of the settlement, officially referred to as the *lapa* scheme, had been built”.⁵⁴ However, notwithstanding

...the development directly reflected the idea of the ‘volkseie’ (nation’s own design), the new residents [of Vlaktefontein] refused to remain in or move into these structures, which were subsequently described as ‘primitive kaffir housing ... causing considerable racial conflict and feelings of hostility.’⁵⁵

Following the residents’ call for the resignation of the City Council of Pretoria’s Mr CW Prinsloo, a threat of strikes, and a mass prayer meeting, the housing programme was abolished. Separate from the *lapa* scheme, but following the identical architectural rondavel design, “the Mamelodi rondavels were erected for the Native Division of the Transvaal Education Department in 1948, just before the demolition of the *lapa* housing”.⁵⁶

While Steyn makes a clear case for the validity and viability of this indigenous architectural design form’s perpetuation, his deduction about why the community of Vlaktefontein rejected this traditional design form for their homes in the new urban context, does not accord with the view that it was fundamentally political. Steyn suggests that:

...one has to conclude that the problem [with the rondavels *lapa* scheme and its rejection by the community] was not political, but cultural – the rondavel is the tangible manifestation of a complex value system that combines custom, kinship, climate, resources and settlement geography, rather than the mere construction of shelter.⁵⁷

This view is contrary to Bakker’s findings of what happened and his understanding of the ideological intentions of the apartheid planners informing their urban planning views and practices. Bakker and his team were of the view that “the Mamelodi rondavels act as the only tangible reminder of the original intention

53 J Walker *et al*, A working history of Mamelodi..., p 17.

54 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 18.

55 South Africa Press Association, Native objections to Vlaktefontein housing plans, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1947-9-19, p 12; K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 18.

56 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 18.

57 G Steyn, The indigenous rondavel..., p 24.

for township design in Vlakfontein in 1947, an ideologically inspired intention that was nipped in the bud through public defiance – as well as of the intention of fixing ‘African’ cultural values in the design of the original PBNC”.⁵⁸ For Baker and other authors,

...[t]he history of the Mamelodi rondavels also opens up a new avenue of research surrounding cultural perceptions of the rondavel typology [because] the rondavel was propagated in 1920 (in composite form) as an affordable and appropriate dwelling type for Afrikaner farmers by the architect Gerard Moerdyk,⁵⁹ who used it in both rural and urban contexts.

During the 1940s to 1950s, South African architects like Betty Spence, Barrie Ebenezer Biermann, and Adriaan Louw Meiring, professor of architecture at the University of Pretoria in 1943, much admired the African cone-on-cylinder dwelling as a contextually responsive dwelling type but not per se as appropriate for contemporary urban living.⁶⁰ Notwithstanding the racial machinations of the time, the considered research and adoption of an indigenous architectural design for the Vlakfontein settlement’s *lapa* scheme resonate with and confirms the notion that architectural form and design hold real and tangible meaning in the development of a sense of self concerning one’s physical space and surroundings. This is similar to the implications and intentions of the presidential library design, discussed further on.

Almost half a century after the foundation of the rondavel’s structures, the City of Tshwane and the City of Delft in the Netherlands signed a Sister City Agreement on 29 November 1999,⁶¹ which led to them partnering to renovate the rondavels together with the National Department of Tourism.⁶² Following the renovation of the rondavel complex in 2004, a dormant period ensued. The long period of inaction saw the renovated Mamelodi rondavels fall victim to vandalism and destruction. As if things could not get worse, in 2018, the “people in Mamelodi watched in horror as the iconic rondavels and heritage centre in the township went

58 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 18.

59 Gerhard Moerdyk (1890–1958) is a South African architect credited with designing the Voortrekker Monument, among other historical landmarks in the country. He is also reported as having designed a significant number of the buildings on the various campuses of the University of Pretoria and that he also was one of the longest serving Chairmen of the Council of the University of Pretoria from 1935 to 1942. <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/46311>, viewed 2021-01-20.

60 K Bakker *et al*, The ‘Mamelodi Rondavels’..., p 20.

61 Anon, *City of Tshwane Annual Report 2007/2008*, p 60.

62 R Moatshe, Rondavels on fire in Mamelodi, *Pretoria News*, 2018-07-19.

up in flames” and that “[a]t least ten of the 14 rondavels standing on one side of the property were gutted”.⁶³ The then Democratic Alliance (DA) Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Economic Development and Spatial Planning, Randall Williams, said the previous ANC-led City of Tshwane administration spent close to R22 million to renovate the place. Still, there was nothing to show for it. Corina Heuvelman, a Dutch politician, drove the project to lobby support for renovating the heritage site in 2004 from the municipality of the City of Delft. When she again visited the area after the fire and vandalism in November 2018 and saw the destruction, she said she intended to lobby support and restore the site to its former glory and turn it into a tourist attraction.⁶⁴ The news media quipped that the “iconic Mamelodi Rondavels and the Heritage Centre in Mamelodi West D6 Section is a miserable sight. The rondavels were never restored; instead, it was allowed to fall into further ruin”.⁶⁵



Figure 5: The Mamelodi Rondavels as on 31 January 2022.
(Photo by author)

63 R Moatshe, Rondavels on fire in Mamelodi, *Pretoria News*, 2018-07-19.

64 R Moatshe, Hope for Mamelodi rondavels heritage site, *Pretoria News*, 2018-12-08.

65 S Ndlazi, Heritage, what heritage? *Pretoria News*, 2019-09-27.

Presidential libraries

While other nations such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Korea also have presidential or heads of state libraries,⁶⁶ presidential libraries are viewed as a “uniquely American institution”.⁶⁷ Though US President Franklin D Roosevelt established the first Presidential Library “to become part of the National Archives”⁶⁸ and opened the library on 30 June 1941,⁶⁹ Don W Wilson, Archivist of the United States, reports that the story of presidential libraries actually “begins in Fremont, Ohio [where] the Rutherford B Hayes Presidential Center was dedicated and opened to the public on May 30, 1916, [making it] the first such institution in the United States”.⁷⁰ Wilson is of the view that “Roosevelt, using the Hayes Library as a precedent and model ... knew he was doing something important, that he was making history during his administration and providing the raw material for the writing of history later on”.⁷¹ The US National Archives report that there are currently 14 presidential libraries in the United States.⁷²

Notwithstanding this long and rich history, presidential libraries in the US have not been without controversy and contestations. In response to concerns about “the cost, time, and energy of creating and maintaining these unique institutions”, Wilson argued that “modern presidential libraries are making ... significant contributions to American culture” in terms of the timely availability of a president’s papers [and improving] public awareness [as a] living institution. As such, they are “less monuments to great men than classrooms of democracy”.⁷³ Public debate among historians and archivists about the unrivalled American presidential libraries,⁷⁴ their

66 YH Chun, “Study on system of record information service of national library with focus on Presidential library of Korea”, (MA thesis: Myungji University) 2008, p 41.

67 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries: Developing to Maturity, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21(4), 1991, p 771.

68 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries..., p 772.

69 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries..., p 778.

70 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries..., p 771.

71 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries..., p 772.

72 Herbert Hoover Library, Franklin D Roosevelt Library, Harry S Truman Library, Dwight D Eisenhower Library, John F Kennedy Library, Lyndon B Johnson Library, Richard Nixon Library, Gerald R Ford Library, Jimmy Carter Library, Ronald Reagan Library, George Bush Library, William J Clinton Library, George W Bush Library, and the Barack Obama Library: Anon, “Presidential Libraries”, *National Archives*. <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/visit>, viewed 2020-11-20.

73 DW Wilson, Presidential Libraries..., p 773.

74 M-K, Han, A Study on the Suggestions and Analysis on the Education Programs in the Presidential Libraries, *International Journal of Knowledge Content Development & Technology* 1(1), July 2011, p 41.

form, legal standing, utility, and significance continue. Adding his voice to the discussion, business writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, Bob Moos reports that:

Like others, I used to think these libraries were no more than 20th-century equivalents of pyramids built by modern-day pharaohs so their accomplishments could live on in splendor. ... I have since changed my mind. ... Presidential libraries have become educational centers teeming with students and schoolchildren. ... [T]heir conferences and forums on political issues will become increasingly crucial, as younger and future generations of Americans attempt to understand these times and the individuals and social forces that shaped them.⁷⁵

Robert F Burk of the Department of History, University of Wisconsin at Madison, notes that “a ‘cult of the presidency’ had become a central tenet of political faith and folklore, despite the shocks to public confidence administered by the protracted Vietnam War and the Watergate excesses”.⁷⁶ For Burk, “[p]olitical pundits and educators had fostered the popular belief that presidents alone set the direction of public policies and ensure that they work as intended in society”.⁷⁷ To illustrate the divergent views about presidential libraries, Burk reports that:

If most of the historical community agreed with Roosevelt’s wish for a separate library, based upon a belief in the New Deal’s significance as a social revolution, Congressional attitudes were less accommodating ... Republicans Hamilton Fish of New York and Everett M Dirksen of Illinois objected to the library as an undemocratic monument to a living American, an unnecessary expense in a time of economic hardship, and an opportunity for Democratic party patronage.⁷⁸

Pamela R McKay, the reference librarian of the Learning Resources Center at Worcester State College, indicates that “[t]he papers generated during an American presidency reflect the activities of that office and the political, economic, and social history of the nation ... [Consequently,] presidential papers are of interest not only to scholars but also to the general public”.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Houston G

75 B Moos, Presidential libraries give life to history, *Dallas Morning News*, 1990-07-13.

76 RF Burk, New Perspectives for Presidential Libraries, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11(3), 1981, p 399.

77 RF Burk, New Perspectives..., p 399.

78 RF Burk, New Perspectives..., p 401.

79 PR McKay, Book Review: Presidential Libraries and Collections by Frits Vein, *The Library Quarterly*, 1988, p 308.

Jones, a past president of the Society of American Archivists who has been one of the leading critics of the concept of private ownership of presidential papers, believes that only “a statesman-President would renounce any private title to the records of his office [because] such a declaration would be an act of statesmanship taken in the public interest”.⁸⁰

Finally, Linda Fisher, archivist, and author of the Ronald Reagan Library’s 1991 report for the National Archives and Records Administration, notes that:

The ongoing debate surrounding the continuing function of Presidential Libraries suggests that many of the challenges these institutions face are symptomatic of their very nature: their respective attention to a single individual’s life limits the scope of their holdings and defines the solicitation and oral history strategy the institution adopts.⁸¹

Notwithstanding the above, the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library extends this concept to South Africa and Africa. The views cited earlier reflect essential concerns regarding the practice and value of creating presidential libraries and why establishing such a library on the African continent will, by definition, face objections, criticisms, and concerns from many quarters. However, it should also be part of the public education such institutions provide to develop a shared understanding of what such institutions should mean to people, the country, and the continent.

Redefining the American notion of the presidential library

The development of the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library possibly signals a critical moment for African self-definition and self-assertion amid an ever-changing global geopolitical landscape. To bolster the significance of this audacious gesture, the architect tasked with imagining the architectural conceptualisation and manifestation of this self-defining gesture is a renowned pan-African architect. Sir David Frank Adjaye was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and is a Ghanaian-British architect, who Queen Elizabeth II knighted in 2017 for his global achievements in architecture. Recognised as one of the 100 most influential people of 2017

80 HG Jones, Presidential Libraries: Is there a case for a national presidential library?, *The American Archivist*, 1975, p 328.

81 L Fisher, The Role and Function of Presidential Libraries, *Report for the National Archives and Records Administration*, 1991, p 3.



Figure 6: The long view of the architectural rendering of the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library.

(Source: Courtesy of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation)

by *TIME* magazine,⁸² Adjaye is known for designing many notable buildings worldwide, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, and the Skolkovo Moscow School of Management.⁸³ Referring to his design for the presidential library, Adjaye posits that “African buildings used to be made of mud brick, so the red will be representing that, just in a modern and new kind of mud brick ... and the three buildings are almost round-shaped.”⁸⁴ Adjaye is also reported to have said that this represents huts, which he described as “stores and chambers of knowledge”.⁸⁵ In South Africa, huts are also commonly referred to as rondavels.⁸⁶ According to Roger C Fisher, Prof Emeritus at the University of Pretoria, “the word ‘rondavel’ is foreign to the English language but has become part of the indigenous Afrikaans terminology describing the cone-on-cylinder hut type”.⁸⁷ Mauritz Naudé of the Department of Architecture, Tshwane University of Technology, reports that “the possibility that the word ‘rondavel’ has become part of the international architectural vocabulary

82 T Golden, “David Adjaye”, *TIME: The 100 most influential People*, <https://time.com/collection/2017-time-100/4736258/david-adjaye/>, viewed 2020-11-20.

83 Anon, Who we are, Adjaye Associates, <https://www.adjaye.com/who-we-are/>, viewed 2020-11-20.

84 B Pheto, Thabo Mbeki library will house African leaders’ papers & artefacts, *Times Live*, 2020-11-20.

85 B Pheto, Thabo Mbeki library will house...”, *Times Live*, 2020-11-20.

86 M Naude, A legacy of rondavels and rondavel houses in the northern interior of South Africa, *South African Journal of Art History* 22(2), 2007, p 217.

87 R Fisher, *Visual lexicon of the South African dwelling* (Cape Town, 1992), pp 3-4.

is suggested when it appeared in the 1914 edition of the Dutch dictionary *Van Dale's Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, where the word is noted as of South African origin".⁸⁸

Consequently, it appears there must be more to the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library than just merely a monument to memorialise an individual. Furthermore, Mbeki's vision for the library is

...to encompass both an African past and an African future. It will be a place where Africans uncover their own history and identity. A place where we are empowered to script a brighter and more prosperous future ... [which] will become the epicenter for an African renaissance — a place of pride, celebration, and future-forward thinking in which a strong sense of the African identity is empowered for further leadership in service to humanity.⁸⁹

This is intended because "the architecture of the library taps into the collective memory of the continent through the establishment of a new historical centre for African consciousness in which knowledge, education, and sustenance are nurtured in the representation and intelligence of the continent."⁹⁰

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, rondavels have had a long and rocky history with the urbanisation of Africans in South Africa, as the case was of the Mamelodi *lapa* scheme of the late 1940s. This indigenous architectural design form was politically vehemently repudiated under different circumstances. As part of modernity, urbanisation also influenced black communities' preferences and sense of self during South Africa's history and development. But while the Mamelodi rondavels still lie in ruin, the modern expression of African architectural design forms encapsulated in the new presidential library design possibly signals an embrace of Africanism previously unimaginable yet critical and sustainable.

88 M Naude, A legacy of rondavels..., p 217.

89 C Harrouk, Adjaye Associates Designs the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library in Johannesburg, South Africa, *ArchDaily*, 2020-11-20 <https://www.archdaily.com/951783/adjaye-associates-designs-the-thabo-mbeki-presidential-library-in-johannesburg-south-africa>, viewed 2020-12-16.

90 P Stevens, David Adjaye reveals Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library for Johannesburg, South Africa, *designboom*, 2020-11-19, <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/david-adjaye-thabo-mbeki-presidential-library-johannesburg-south-africa-11-19-2020/>, viewed 2020-12-16.

Being designed by a renowned pan-African architect in partnership with one of Africa's greatest champions for the African Renaissance, the presidential library project possibly presents an opportunity for the library as an idea and concept in the form of a national and continental resource in service of nation-building. The Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library will also house other African heads of state's documents, thereby setting it apart from other presidential libraries and possibly extending and refining the concept further. These features of the presidential library institution on the African continent present the institution with enormous potential in its public service benefits for South Africa and the continent.

That Mbeki would dare such an audacious gesture is not unusual. Notwithstanding his presidency's controversies, he is an acknowledged erudite leader and a formidable Africanist. Among Mbeki's achievements are his development, mobilisation, and the eventual creation of the African Union during his presidency. Thirty-nine years following the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) launch to end colonialism and unite the peoples of Africa, the continent's leaders inaugurated its successor, the African Union, in July 2002 in Durban. As expected, the African Union inherited the OAU's mantle of Pan-Africanism with a broader mandate to meet the challenges of a rapidly globalising world. At the inauguration of the African Union, Mbeki declared that "the time has come that Africa must take her rightful place in global affairs ... The time has come to end the marginalisation of Africa".⁹¹ Perhaps only an African leader exhibiting "statesmanship" as Wilson mentioned earlier, manages such a feat. Mbeki's statesmanship was illustrated, among other things, by his acceptance of his recall as president of the ruling African National Congress and consequently as President of the Republic of South Africa in 2009,⁹² a feature greatly lacking among other heads of state in South Africa, the continent, and the world.

Furthermore, the idea of including the documents and artefacts of other African heads of state promises to overcome some of the limitations and drawbacks discussed in the US experience of presidential libraries. It will potentially create an African scholarship centre that will illustrate the fundamental links between African nations and their histories during various heads of state's terms of office whose work will also be housed at the library. With all the experience gleaned

91 Anon, *African Renewal*, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/september-2002/african-union-launched>, viewed 2020-12-18.

92 D Robertson, South African President Mbeki Agrees to Resign, *Voice of America* (VOA), 2009-11-01.

about presidential libraries, the translation of this concept to the African soil seems poised to maximise the benefits for public education and scholarship such a library makes possible.

Of great importance, also, is the positive reception of the elected architectural design for the library – the rondavel and its association with African virtues and aspirations compared to the outright rejection of the Mamelodi *lapa* scheme (Mamelodi Rondavels) by the community at the time, which marks one of the first community protests in the history of Mamelodi. This re-emergence of the rondavel design to represent “Africanness” in its broadest and most positive sense might indicate our country having traversed a long way from the dark days of apartheid and the abject deliberate subjugation, rejection, and vilification of all things African. The presidential library also holds the promise to promote the value to our society and continent of literacy, reading, the archive, and the legacies we have endured.

From the *Black Panther*’s Wakanda to Nkandla and the presidential library, it appears that the amalgamation and adaptation of African indigenous knowledge systems into modernity as part of the African Renaissance project and the promotion of Africans’ sense of self and self-definition are enjoying a resurgence and positive reception. The modernisation of traditional African design for contemporary sensibilities is possibly an evolution over time that reflects an awareness of the rich and complex heritage connecting South Africa to the rest of Africa and its peoples. It supports a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness between South Africa, the rest of the African continent, and the world. The rondavel architectural design, and perhaps African indigenous knowledge systems, have come a long way from its public and dramatic rejection in the late 1940s to the exuberant and triumphant embrace 60 years later.

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