THE CAPITAL’S HISTORY AS TOLD BY ITS BUILDINGS

BY GERARD MOERDyk

In the following article, Mr. Gerard Moerdyk, the well-known architect, shows how the understanding eye can read the romance of Pretoria in the styles of its buildings, and how South Africa is working towards a characteristic style in architecture.

PRETORIA Philadelphia! What an ambitious name to give a struggling village! And then it was shortened still further to Pretoria only. Cynics declare that it was done because its population became disillusioned, but all good Pretoria men believe that it was on account of the lengthiness that the town’s end was clipped off. However this may be, we must hope that our city fathers do not lose sight of all the ideals that such a name calls for.

At present Pretoria is still suffering from the insecurity complex of the young; its principles of which there are still many examples over the older portion of the town, Built up to the side walk, with its wide covered stoep stretching the whole length in front, it looked as if it were the place of a steadfast burglar.

Then, with starting suddenness, the Republic became famous. Gold was discovered. Changes were brought about, which, however, only sudden wealth can bring. There had been no preparation, there could be no gradual development, and nowhere is this more evident than in the architecture of the years that followed.

Prosperity brought a flamboyant style. Foundations were raised, dwellings were ornamented with towers and turrets, large windows and many wooden trellis work round the verandah, as it then became, which was usually gaily painted green and white. The houses certainly looked gay and prosperous, but the homesickness of the former type was missing.

Of greater importance, though, is the fact that the direction in which this style led was wrong. The corruptions that became general, cheap imported materials were used, orientation and status were not taken into consideration, history was forgotten. The houses are still there, but in the days in which they were built, sudden wealth, great excitement, gradually passing away.

The old Government Building and the Pretoria Town Hall are typical examples of the public buildings of the time. There is a triumphant flourish about them, that would not have been amiss in gay Vienna itself. But the change had come about too swiftly, the whole style was impudent, complete in every detail, without a thought of historical or climatic conditions. It had not been built like the Old Cape Dutch style, for it had no guiding gods like Thibault or Anton Anreith to cast it into a suitable mould. It was a place, it came and went, without adding anything useful to the architecture of the country.

Then came the war with its primitive effect on all building development. And after the war came many changes. So that all public buildings have been designed departmentally, and departmental architecture has been characterised by a sense of restraint. The eye of the quantity surveyor has put a check upon the flights of imagination and has kept the buildings tied down to brick and mortar.

Mr. Gerard Moerdyk

The house of President Kruger on Church Street is a typical example of the period. Architecturally it does not reflect any definite phase, except that it marks the beginning of the size of immigration of building materials in the Transvaal. The spirit of the building, however, is typical of the mode of living in the early days of the South African Republic. Around it hover memories of the President, approachable to everyone, enveloped in the blue haze of his always-lit pipe, sitting on the stoep, listening with equal attention to grievances, topical jokes, and political schemes. The only distinctive feature of the presidential residence is the two lions guarding the entrance and they are but inferior copies of Nizov’s lions in St. Peter's.

This type of house had its drawbacks, and in most cases its planning was not good, but it possessed a quiet dignity which the next style lacks.