

# An appraisal of selected examples of Gerhard Moerdijk's work (1890-1958)

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## Abstract

Gerhard Moerdijk (1890-1958) was one of the first practicing Afrikaans-speaking architects. He was active from 1917 until the early fifties during which time he and his partners realized a large body of work – around eighty churches alone. He was also the author of Afrikaner Nationalism's most revered icon, the Voortrekker Monument.

By his own account Moerdijk claimed to have created "*volkseie argitektuur*". He believed that a style of architecture reflects the symbolic aspirations of a nation.

Did Moerdijk contribute to the architectural and cultural continuum? Did he in actual fact, develop a *volkseie argitektuur*?

How should one appraise Moerdijkian artifacts in a revisionist climate? And what are the particular and specific features of each of Moerdijk's stylistic phases?

## Samevatting

Gerhard Moerdijk (1890-1958) was een van die eerste praktiserende Afrikaanssprekende argitekte. Sy loopbaan strek vanaf 1917 tot die vroeë vyftigerjare - 'n tydperk waarin hy en sy vennote 'n groot hoeveelheid werk, waaronder ongeveer tagtig kerke, gedoen het. Hy was ook die skepper van een van Afrikaner Nasionalisme se grootste ikone, die Voortrekkermonument.

Na sy eie mening het Moerdijk 'n "*volkseie argitektuur*" ontwikkel. Hy het geglo dat argitektoniese styl die simboliese aspirasies van 'n volk weerspieël.

Bogenoemde laat 'n mens met vele vrae. Het Moerdijk werklik bygedra tot die argitektoniese en kulturele erfenis? Het hy inderdaad 'n *volkseie argitektuur* ontwikkel? Hoe word sy werk in die konteks van die nuwe Suid Afrika geëvalueer? En wat is die spesifieke eienskappe van elk van Moerdijk se stylfasies?

Architecture is the one art which comes into close contact with our daily lives. It also ... reflects our aspirations. The collective feelings of a people seem to flow into architecture ... A style of architecture should reflect and symbolize the habits, beliefs and aspirations of a nation. Gerhard Moerdijk (1922).<sup>1</sup>

Gerhard Moerdijk was one of the first formally trained Afrikaans-speaking architects. He practised from around 1917 until the early 1950s; at first on his own, then in partnership with Gordon Leith (1886-1965), Wynand Louw (1883-1967), and later with Harry Watson. Moerdijk realized a large body of work – around eighty churches alone. He was also the author of some of Afrikaner Nationalism's most revered icons, including the Voortrekker Monument (1938).

Was Moerdijk's success due to being an Afrikaner – was he at the receiving end of what would now be called "affirmative action"? Or was he a man of extraordinary talent? Did he act pragmatically by exploiting the Afrikaner-British political conflict to his advantage? Or, did he and his partners contribute positively to the architectural and cultural continuum? Did Moerdijk develop a specific architectural style – "*volkseie argitektuur*"? And how should one appraise Moerdijkian artifacts in a revisionist climate?

The investigation leading to this article was limited to ecclesiastical and secular buildings. Examples of each building type were visited and

analysed in terms of parti/concept, image, expression, meaning, geometry, materiality, space and form. A brief summary of Moerdijk's life and career was thought to be of interest to position him in the cultural landscape and to understand his architectural intentions.

### Biographical notes

Gerhard Moerdijk was born near Nylstroom in 1890, as the eldest son of a Dutch immigrant teacher. During the Anglo-Boer War his father served with the Boer commandos. Mrs Moerdijk and her children spent the war in a concentration camp in Standerton. After the war, young Gerhard was educated at the Pretoria Boys' High School. At the age of sixteen he joined the Department of Public Works as a draughtsman. In 1908 he met Gordon Leith, who joined the department after he had completed his studies at the Architectural Association School in London.

In 1910, probably under the influence of Leith, Moerdijk left for the United Kingdom to study at the Architectural Association School, where he emerged as a deserving student. The subject of his thesis was an *in situ* study of French and Italian Renaissance architecture.

In 1913 Moerdijk sat for his final RIBA Part 2 examination. His examination question in architectural design was typically classicist in the Sir Banister Fletcher tradition, then current at the Architectural Association: "A group of mortuary buildings in connection with a crematorium". (Vermeulen, 1999: 34.) As part of the exercise, students were required to study and interpret a Wagnerian opera.

Moerdijk successfully completed his RIBA Part 2 qualification and emerged as the top student in Classical Architecture in the

Commonwealth. (Vermeulen, 1999: 35.)

On his return to South Africa, Moerdijk discovered that few opportunities existed for an Afrikaans-speaking architect in a British dominated South Africa. Eventually he rejoined the Public Works Department until the advent of the First World War.

With the outbreak of the war, building activity came to a standstill and Moerdijk, as well as other staff members, lost his job. He eventually found employment as a draughtsman at Robinson Deep Gold Mines in Johannesburg where he stayed until he opened his own practice.

While Moerdijk worked at Robinson Deep he developed a series of designs for church buildings. The work was published as *Kerkgeboue* in 1918. Moerdijk distributed the booklet to congregations who were planning to build new buildings. In the same year Moerdijk secured his first commission for a Dutch Reformed Church, in Bothaville.

In 1918 Gordon Leith and Gerhard Moerdijk opened an architectural practice in Johannesburg. In 1920 Moerdijk joined the Broederbond. He relocated his practice to Pretoria in 1924.

Moerdijk increasingly involved himself in the Afrikaner cause. For example, he advocated the use of Afrikaans on architectural drawings and specifications. In 1927 he pointedly delivered a speech in Afrikaans at a function of the Transvaal Institute of Architects in Johannesburg where Sir Herbert Baker was the guest of honour.<sup>2</sup> Moerdijk also actively lobbied against the Architects and Quantity Surveyors Act of 1927. The Act excluded architects who had not been trained in the United Kingdom from practising in South Africa. He advocated the use of locally manufactured building

materials instead of imported British products.

Through friendship, as well as client and family contact, he socialised with the emerging Afrikaner elite. He befriended activists and elected officials, who were often present at the opening of his buildings.<sup>3</sup> Moerdijk's wife, Sylva, was active in the National Party. Over the years the Moerdijks entertained Hans Strijdom, Dr H. F. Verwoerd, Blackie Swart and Dr D. F. Malan in their Pretoria home.

Moerdijk profited from his Afrikaner Nationalist sentiments – recognition by the Afrikaner establishment came early in his career. On the other hand, the British dominated profession largely ignored him and his work.

### **Architectural career**

Moerdijk established a successful architectural practice with offices in a number of cities. He actively participated in the practice until the early fifties. The practice continued after his retirement and produced, often in collaboration with other firms, some of the most prestigious buildings in Pretoria, such as the Transvaal Provincial Administration Building (1962) with Meiring Naudé.

The artifacts produced by his practice can be divided into three distinct periods; Classic Revival, Art Deco and Modernist.

### **Classic revival (1918-1930)**

Sir Hebert Baker and the Baker School dominated the first part of Moerdijk's career. In 1902 Baker moved his practice from Cape Town to Johannesburg. Under the patronage of Lord Alfred Milner and Cecil John Rhodes, Baker secured prestigious public buildings such as the Union Buildings and the Pretoria Station. After Baker had left South Africa in 1913, his practice continued until 1920 when the firm was

dissolved. Baker's influence continued until around 1940. According to Fransen, "Competent architects continued Baker's work and graced many South African cities with their well-constructed and tasteful buildings". (Fransen, 1982: 231.)

Baker and his proteges produced well-detailed and crafted buildings in traditional materials; local granite, sandstone, Rhodesian Teak and Cordoba tiles. They borrowed architectural styles freely to suit client preferences, symbolic aspirations and site conditions. Buildings were designed in styles ranging from Italian Renaissance to Cape Dutch. "Many new public buildings were built in the robust Union Classical Style, with its rusticated plinths, giant orders and heavy cornice treatment." (Harber, 1992: 8.)

Moerdijk, as an Afrikaner nationalist, disagreed with Bakerism – in his opinion Bakerism symbolised the British Empire and the loss of Afrikaner independence. Yet, Moerdijk's early buildings, like those of his contemporaries, such as Gordon Leith (1886-1965) and Vivian Rees-Pool (1883-1925), were designed in the classical tradition. He built with local granite, sandstone, teak and Cordoba tiles. Of note are the Dutch Reformed Churches at Bothaville (1918), Bloemfontein North (1923), Wolmaransstad (1928), Pretoria East (1928) and Kroonstad (1935).

### **Ecclesiastical architecture**

In 1918 Moerdijk published *Kerkgeboue* with introductions by Anton van Wouw and the Rev J.D. Kestell. (Vermeulen, 1999: 43.) In this booklet, which was never commercially distributed, he illustrated a number of possible church layouts modelled on classical precedent and accused his contemporaries of reproducing the church buildings of Europe and not building "honestly"

with local materials. He distributed the booklet to congregations that were planning to build new churches. His marketing strategy was successful – Moerdijk designed around eighty churches during his career.

Conceptually, with the exception of Bothaville, Moerdijk's churches were modelled on the more compact and centralised plan form that had developed in the Netherlands after the Reformation to satisfy Protestant liturgical needs. This plan form had also been popular in the Cape prior to the introduction, in the nineteenth century, of layouts inspired by the Gothic Revival. The Dutch Reformed Churches in Bloemfontein (1923), Pretoria East (1928), Wolmaransstad (1928) and Kroonstad (1935) are typical examples.

Moerdijk's most mature classical church is probably the Dutch Reformed Church, Pretoria East (1928). The building is typical of this period – a freestanding pavilion, topped by a Renaissance-inspired dome with lantern, enclosing a Greek cross on plan, classical pilasters, columns and architrave with a Baroque tower. Moerdijk applied the use of orders sparsely; only at loggias or in the form of pilasters. The stone-clad brick masonry walls appear to be massive in the Byzantine tradition. Apse spaces are rectangular and arched. The four apses terminate in semi-circular windows. According to Vermeulen, the glazing is opaque to create "atmosphere" in the interior. (Vermeulen. 1999. 79.) The pews are arranged in the form of an amphitheatre with a centralised pulpit. The mezzanine walkway or gallery is curved.

### Secular architecture

One of the first major public projects Moerdijk realised was the Synodal Hall, Bloemfontein (1925),

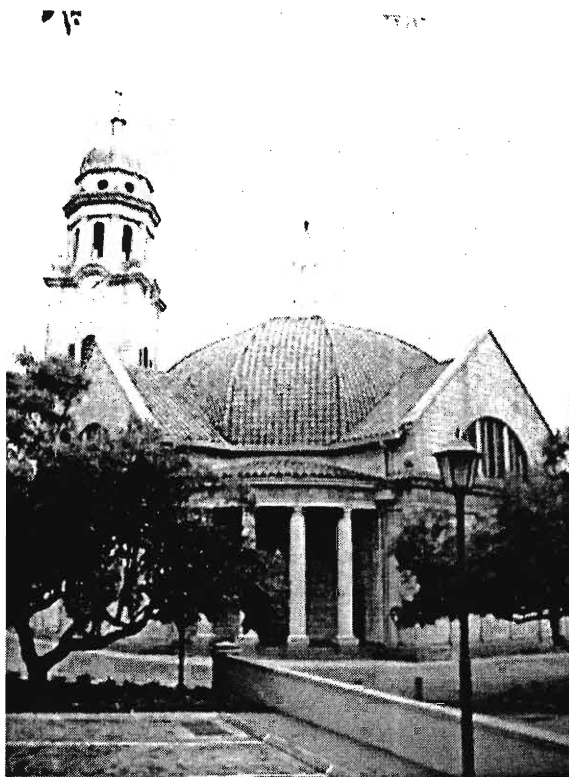


Figure 1. Dutch Reformed Church, Pretoria East (1928)

which he designed in partnership with Wynand Louw. They visualised the building, on a street corner in downtown Bloemfontein, as a freestanding pavilion, similar to Moerdijk's "dorp kerke". The plan form is based on the typical Dutch compact and centralized floor plan, an octagonal amphitheatre with three symmetrical wings. Offices of the synod were housed in the north wing. Moerdijk's front façade, on President Brand Street, emulated the Pantheon in Rome. The façade is typically classical with Tuscan columns, pediment and portico.<sup>4</sup> The building is clad in light grey sandstone. According to architect Anton Roodt, the hall is rather somber and this note of gloom is further reinforced by the dark red colour of the Rhodesian Teak paneling, amber-coloured glazing and the diffused light reflected from the domed ceiling. (Vermeulen, 1999: 78.) The seating is arranged in semi-

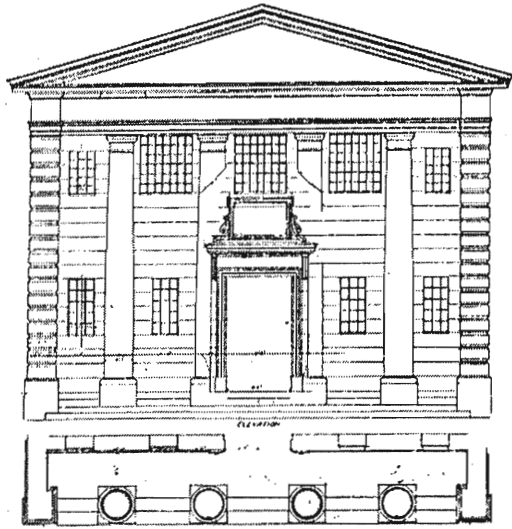


Figure 2. Synodal Hall, Bloemfontein (SA Architectural Record, September 1925)

circular fashion on kiaat (Cape Teak) parquet flooring.

In 1926 Moerdijk submitted a design in a national competition for a Town Hall in Pretoria. F.G. McIntosh and Lockwood Hall eventually won the competition. Of the twenty-seven entries, both Moerdijk's project and that of his friend Gordon Leith were short-listed. The results of the competition were published in *The South African Architectural Record*.<sup>5</sup>

Of interest are the assessors' comments with regard to Moerdijk's proposal:

Mr Moerdijk's scheme is somewhat cramped in plan and lacks directness in connection of the various elements. The planning of the halls is interesting, but the interiors of the Main Hall, an octagon, with its circulation of small bays and somewhat flat ceiling, is doubtful. The elevations are well handled in a monumental manner, but, here again, cost appears to have been a deciding factor ... (Pearse, 1926: 36.)

For a long time, Moerdijk had been lobbying the Afrikaner elements in the Union government to retain

outside consultants (Afrikaners). In 1927 Moerdijk was called to the Union Buildings to meet with the Minister of Railways, Mr Charlie Malan and he was commissioned to design the new Johannesburg Station:

Minister Malan moes na die bekendmaking geweldige kritiek verduur. Die Afrikaanse koerante en die Afrikaanssprekende publiek het Moerdijk se aanstelling heelhartig goedgekeur, maar die Engelse koerante was woedend." (Vermeulen, 1999: 82.)

The uproar in the press eventually resulted in a joint commission – Moerdijk and Gordon Leith were retained to execute the work. The façade, probably by Leith, is typically classical revivalist in the Baker idiom.

### Art Deco (1930-1948)

In 1928 Moerdijk and his wife Sylva visited the United States and Europe, where he came into contact with contemporary architectural trends. Internationally, three trends, viz. the International Style, Art Deco and Neoclassic Revival, marked this period.

The academicism of the Neoclassic Revival was promoted by officialdom in Germany – Hitler recognised the propagandist value of architecture and strove, through his architects, Paul Ludwig Troost and Albert Speer, to immortalise ideas such as "security", "national pride", "self-consciousness" and "discipline". As opposed to South Africa, the International Style had already been established in Europe and the second generation of architects were making their debut – Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer and Oscar Niemeyer. The third trend, also in opposition to the "avant-garde functionalism" of the International Style, was Art Deco. The Art Deco style was more difficult to

define; in principle Art Deco was a decorative style combining the traditional and the modern, while absorbing a variety of influences and movements.

In South Africa, during the 1930s, the architectural establishment (Bakerism) was being challenged. Furner, Rex Martienssen and W. Gordon McIntosh promoted the International Style in their writings and buildings.

On his return to South Africa Moerdijk's reaction to Modernism could probably have been predicted if one considers his classical training at the Architectural Association School – he embraced a form of Art Deco in lieu of the Purism of the International Style. Perhaps he felt more comfortable with Art Deco because it represented modernism in a more traditional way:

The architects ... who designed what are now identified as Art Deco buildings, were on the whole classically trained; their creations were traditional in terms of their inner structures, materials and services." (Bayer. 1992. 8.)

Moerdijk's Reserve Bank in Bloemfontein (1936), the Voortrekker Monument (1938) and the Merensky Library in Pretoria (1937-1939) are Art Deco inspired buildings.

### Secular architecture

In 1935 Moerdijk was commissioned to design a new building for the Reserve Bank in Bloemfontein (C.f. Figure 3). It was to be a prestigious building located on a street corner on Hoffman Square.

The Reserve Bank was conceived as a rectangular block to occupy the void between two existing neo-classical structures on a vacant street corner. A horizontal plane, created by drawing a line to connect the parapet and the cornice of the two adjoining buildings, determined the



Figure 3. Reserve Bank, Bloemfontein (1936).

height of the building. The intent was that the building should symbolise sentiments such as "security", "stability" and "faith in the economy".

Moerdijk created a formal symmetrical block with narrow vertical openings. The building is raised on a heavy, solid 2.5 metre-high granite plinth, an extension of the foundation walls to suggest permanence;

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matthew 7:25).

The façade is dressed in travertine and marble to allude to wealth and, once again, stability – the nation's resources are safe within the enclosing walls of the structure. To add to the sense of security, wrought iron burglar bars cover the windows and the exterior walls taper to the top.

The foundation plinth is extended to frame the front door. A relief carving of merino sheep on the architrave symbolizes the wealth of the Free State. (Vermeulen, 1999: 113.) The two lanterns flanking the front door are modeled on lanterns at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. The cornice consists of a series of stylised horizontal moldings, a band of stacked coins and horizontal shadow lines.

The double-volume banking hall is located on the *piano nobile*.

The interior finishes are in marble, travertine, terrazzo and yellow wood, whilst Moerdijk designed the furniture in exotic woods such as kiasat, tamboti and Cape laurel. (Vermeulen, 1999: 115.)

The Reserve Bank was probably Moerdijk's most elegant and successful Art Deco building. He worked for a sympathetic client and sufficient funds were available. On the other hand, the Merensky Library (1935-1937), another Art Deco building designed in the same period, was less convincing.

The Merensky Library is situated on the University of Pretoria campus, adjacent to the Old Arts Building. The latter was a Romanesque inspired arcade building, designed by Percy Eagle, a member of the Baker School.

Moerdijk's Merensky Library, although a relatively small building, was conceived as a solid symmetrical freestanding pavilion (cf. Figure 4). The rectangular block is domed and raised about three metres above the natural grade level on a robust, rusticated granite plinth. The exterior walls are clad in concrete block with granite finish. The external

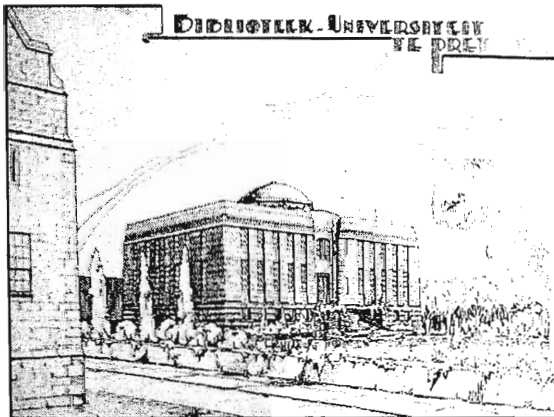


Figure 4. Moerdijk's perspective of the Merensky Library, Pretoria. (1935) (Courtesy of University of Pretoria.)

walls are inclined either to echo the incline of the walls of the Old Arts Building or, on the other hand, to

satisfy an obscure optical correction. The effect of the inclined walls, the massive plinth and the solidity of the structure are monumental.

A formal staircase leads to the recessed front door. According to Fisher, the curved walls flanking the entrance represent "the open book, knowledge revealed, especially biblical knowledge". (Vermeulen, 1999: 117.) The recessed wall panel at the front door is decorated with images in relief representing stylised crocodiles, Zimbabwean birds and baboons. These figures apparently symbolise the spirit of water, fertility and the heavens: "the bird, spirit of the skies, refers to the spiritual inspiration of the creative writers of Afrikaans (and perhaps of the Architect as author of the building)". A zigzag block pattern wraps around the building, symbolising water, according to Fisher. (Vermeulen, 1999: 117.)

The formal ascending approach to the front door terminates in a narrow and constipated entrance foyer. The entrance hall is symmetrical – a pair of stairs and toilets flanks the thoroughfare into the main hall. With some imagination the main hall could recall the roofed and domed cortile of a Renaissance *palazzo*. Unfortunately the first-floor gallery is not open to the floor below – a screen comprising Stars of David set in a series of repetitive circles within the arched supports to the dome separates the spaces (C.f. Figure 5). The effect is that of a depressing enclosure, creating, perhaps, an emotional state suitable for serious reflection and study? Or should one read a religious meaning into the space? <sup>6</sup> According to Fisher, the original idea was to create a circular hole in the floor of the main hall and to suspend a Foucault pendulum from the dome to introduce a "cosmic dimension" to the building. (Vermeulen, 1999: 117.)





Figure 5. Main Hall, Merensky Library, Pretoria. 1935 (Courtesy of University of Pretoria.)

The decoration is consistently aggressive and triangulated: window mullions, spandrel panels, the introduction of the Star of David in the screens and the zigzag patterned cornice. The effect of the building as a whole is monumental and belligerent: perhaps a suitable symbol to proclaim emerging Afrikaner self-consciousness during the 1930s? In *Die Volkstem* of 11 October 1937, P.C. Coetzee heralded the building as a masterpiece: "Die Pretoriase Universiteitsbiblioteek gaan een van die mooiste biblioteekgeboue in die Unie word". (Vermeulen, 1999: 116.)

In 1938 Moerdijk won an international competition to design a monument to celebrate the achievements of the Voortrekkers (C.f. Figure 6). His initial design was compromised when Dr E.C. Pienaar suggested that an ox-wagon laager be drawn around the structure, a suggestion readily accepted by Moerdijk.

Moerdijk visualised the structure as an altar to the Voortrekkers, recalling his final RIBA examination question in 1913, "A group of mortuary buildings in connection with a crematorium". Like many Afrikaners at the time, Moerdijk linked the Great Trek of 1836-38 with the account of Abram leaving Ur in search of the Heimat:

"1) Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee. 2) And I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. 7) And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed I will give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him." (Genesis 12:1-7.)

Moerdijk organised the monument on three levels; a cellar ("*Campo Santo*"), *piano nobile* (Hall of Heroes) and a gallery. Supposedly the three levels symbolise the Trinity. (Vermeulen, 1999: 129.)

The lowest level (cellar) contains a centrally placed empty marble tomb raised on a shallow platform. Access to the cenotaph from the Hall of Heroes above is by means of narrow circular stairs, located in the corners of the building.

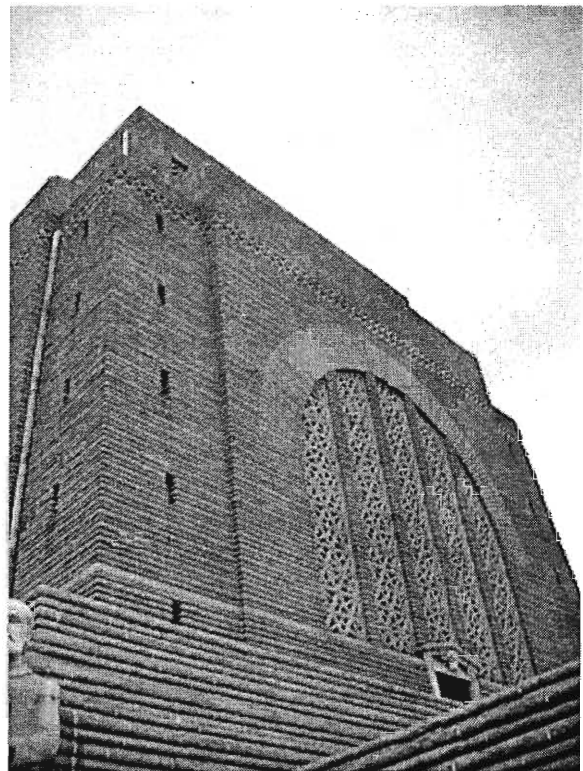


Figure 6. Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria. (1938)



The building is entered on the middle floor, the *piano nobile* (Hall of Heroes). The floor of the Hall of Heroes is perforated by a large circular hole to permit visitors to look down at the cenotaph "with bent head". The Hall of Heroes was designed as an imposing vertical space, organised symmetrically. The plan is in the form of a Greek cross. Massive masonry pillars rise from the four corners to terminate in burlesque arches topped by a dome. The dome is perforated to allow a beam of sunlight to fall on the cenotaph on 16 December, the day of the Covenant. A continuous relief depicting the trials and tribulations of the Voortrekkers encircles the floor. The relief conveys ideas such as "birth", "negotiation", "treachery" and "victory" in the form of sculptural vignettes. Heroic figures of mythical proportion (Piet Retief, Andries Pretorius, etc.) are represented in Egyptian frontal or profile view with distorted torsos.

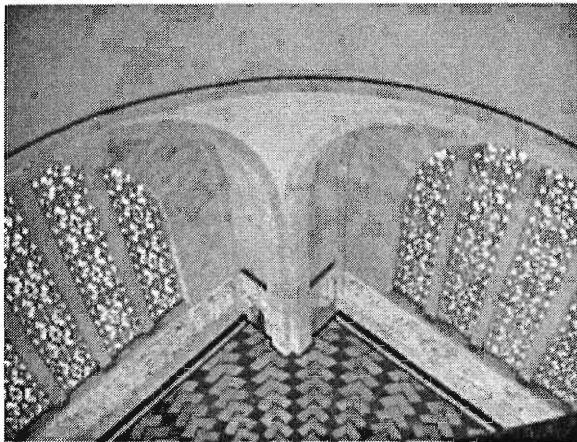


Figure 7. Exploding Arrows, Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria. (1938)

The floor pattern of the Hall of Heroes explodes in ripples from the circular opening to the outside walls - arrows shoot in a 360° radius from the cenotaph below.

According to Vermeulen, the arrows symbolise the sacrifices made to reach the entire (Afrikaner) population. (Vermeulen, 1999: 129.) Kruger, on the other hand, interpreted

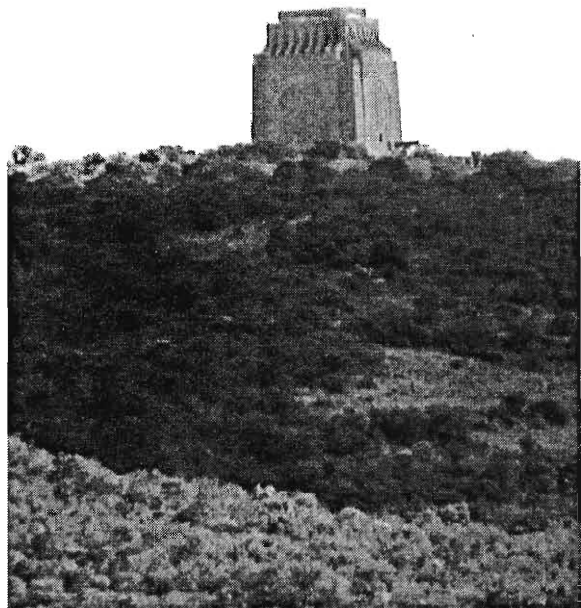


Figure 8. Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria. (1938)

the radiating arrows as the crystallisation of the process whereby the Afrikaner nation developed a sense of self-consciousness. (Kruger, 1977: 639.) One could, in a changed world, read the exploding arrows as the forceful (*kragdadige*) action of the Voortrekkers and their quarrelsome progenitor wilfully to shape a land and its people. Perhaps the fact that the massive perimeter walls of the structure (and the laager) contain the explosion is particularly symbolic – *kragdadigheid* no longer reigns unchecked.

The Hall of Heroes is entered through a small front door topped by a flat pediment with a buffalo head as centrepiece. The buffalo head allegedly symbolises the strength of the Afrikaner in adversity.

A gallery, symbolising the future of South Africa, forms the third level of the building.

When approaching the monument from the parking lot, one

ascends a massive staircase dominated by the *al fresco* colossus – a tribute to the Voortrekkers, mythical men and women, larger than life? Along the route one passes through the entrance of the ox wagon laager and a pair of symmetrical toilet blocks. The stair terminates on a generous landing (“crazy paving”) with a statue, on axis, of the Voortrekker mother and children. Flanking the threesome, two flights of stairs lead to a terrace and the main entrance – a low door crowned with a buffalo-headed pediment. The ascent to the front door is long and tiring, possibly suggesting the arduous task of crossing the Drakensberg with ox wagons on bare feet.

Moerdijk’s Voortrekker Monument, like Baker’s Union Buildings, is visible from most of Pretoria. The two buildings face one another across the central business district, each symbolising a diametrically opposed view of South African society and the future.

Baker’s sophisticated “soft-centred” building, sited along the contour lines below the crest of Meintjieskop, stands in stark contrast to Moerdijk’s stocky block perched on the crest of the kopje (C.f. Figure 9).

The one building speaks of evolution and a genteel sophisticated way of life, “elegant reticence...a quietly confident system of government” (Glancey, 1998: 39), while the other expresses force, anger, struggle, dominance, subjugation and *kragdadigheid*. Moerdijk expressed the following intention with regard to the monument: “n Gedenkteken wat duisend jaar lank en meer aan groot daad moet herinner, moet ruim van opvatting wees en eer toeken aan die wat eer waardig is”. (Vermeulen, 1999: 129.)<sup>7</sup>

The Voortrekker Monument received a fair amount of criticism. The image projected by the building,

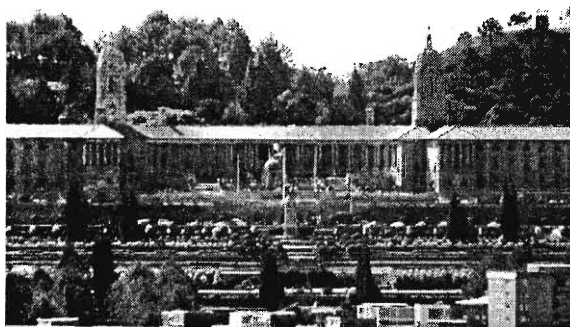


Figure 9. Herbert Baker. Union Buildings, Pretoria. (1909-10)

depending on one’s point of view and cultural background, could suggest a 1930s Art Deco radiogram, an American power station or a well-matured protuberance on the skin. The building shows a definite affinity with the *Volkerschlacht* in Leipzig and Bruce Dellit’s Anzac Memorial Hall in Sydney (1934). Yet, the spectacular opening in 1949 was heralded in the Afrikaans press as a milestone in nation building. The monument became the jewel in the crown of successive Afrikaner governments who hosted ritualistic spectacles. At the base of the monument a generation of Afrikaans boys and girls attended functions to reconfirm the Covenant, to be taught about their Afrikaner selves and to be reconfirmed as the white rulers of the veld.

### Modernism

During the 1950s Pretoria was the centre for what Gus Gernecke referred to as the “Second Wave of the Modern Movement” (Fisher & Le Roux, 1998: 197). The architectural milieu was influenced by publications such as *Brazil Builds* (1943), foreign journals and *The South African Architectural Record*. The buildings of Brazilian modernists such as Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer captured the imagination of the architectural

fraternity. Student work often emulated icons such as Niemeyer's Belo Horizonte chapel (1942-43) and the Ministry of Health, Rio de Janeiro (1938-43). During the 1950s and 1960s Brazilian modernist buildings appeared in and around Pretoria, notably Helmut Stauch's Meat Board Building (1952), Karl Jooste with Phillip Nel's Aula (1959), and Moerdijk & Watson with Meiring Naudé's Transvaal Administration Building (1962), as well as their South African Revenue Services Building (1952).

Towards the end of his career, Moerdijk practised an eclectic form of Modernism, for example, the Gereformeerde Kerk, Potchefstroom (1952), the Klerksdorp Municipal Building (1949), and the Noord-Kerk, Bloemfontein (1950s). He also experimented with the ideas of the Brazilian Modernists, most likely under the influence of the young architects trained in South Africa in his office. The South African Revenue Services Building, Pretoria (1952) is a good example.

### **Ecclesiastical architecture**

Moerdijk's Reformed Church and Theological School, Potchefstroom (1952) was based on a single loaded corridor plan type and the spatial arrangements he had perfected during the 1920s. The plan of the church is inspired by a Greek cross, a dome covers the central space, apse spaces are vaulted and the seating is arranged in the form of an amphitheatre. However, contrary to his previous churches, the building was designed in a Modernist idiom – stark cubist brick blocks and tower, a pyramid roof over the church building; all stripped of decoration and classical detail. Of particular interest is the symbolical claims voiced by Dr Dries van der Walt – according to van der Walt, Moerdijk consciously expressed a series of abstract ideas in his church buildings to create meaning, although

“Die simboliek moet as sinnebeelding en voorstelling aan sekere gedagtes uitdrukking gee. Dit moet nie die voorwerp van aanbidding word nie.” (Van der Walt, 1999: 39.)

According to Moerdijk, the cubist form of the Theological School, the eastern church façade and the tower, was a metaphor for a monument, the Wall of the Reformation in Geneva. The eastern façade of the building therefore symbolised the Reformation.

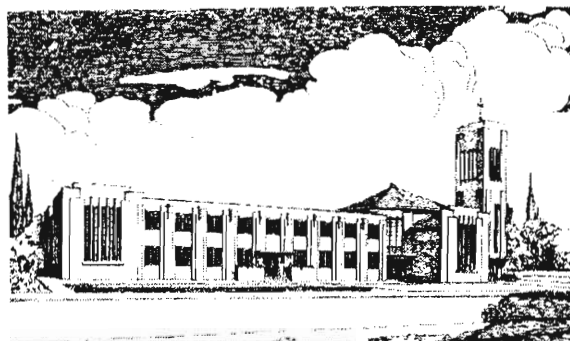


Figure 10. Wall of Reformation, Gereformeerde Kerk, Potchefstroom. 1952. (Du Plooy and Van Der Walt, 1999: 45.)

On entering the church building the curved gallery symbolises the outstretched arms of the church embracing the community. By embracing the congregation, the community is drawn together in the sacraments, prayer and the Testament. Further, the wood panelling behind the pulpit represents a tongue to symbolise the spreading of the Word of God. Within the panel three painted crosses are suggested to recall the crucifixion on Golgotha.

The three vertical lines of the “crosses” also suggest the Trinity. The pipes of the organ are arranged in the form of a harp and decorated with a Star of David. The idea was that the congregation would connect with the Old Testament when they sang the Psalms. (Van der Walt, 1999: 39-42.)

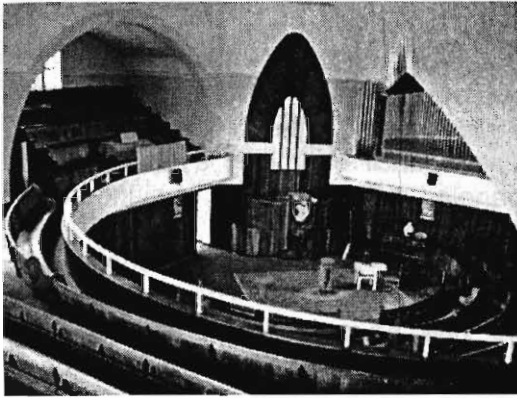


Figure 11. Tongue of the World. Embracing gallery and Vertical lines suggesting the Trinity. Gereformeerde Kerk, Potchefstroom. (1952)

The Noord-Kerk in Bloemfontein (1950s) was one of Moerdijk's last church buildings. Once again, the building was based on the typical Greek cross plan type he had perfected over four decades. The main assembly space is roofed with a pyramid and lit with clear-storey windows. Gable roofs enclose the apse spaces. The semi-circular arched windows and stone veneer walls of Pretoria East were replaced with elliptical windows and face brick.

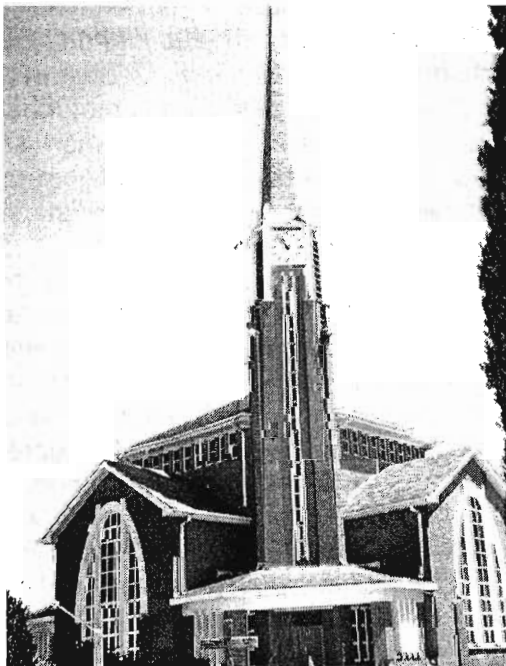


Figure 12. Noord-Kerk, Bloemfontein. (1950s) (Vermeulen)

The main entrance to the building is on the axis of the tower, a prominent element in the symmetrical composition.

The design of the Noord-Kerk was emulated by a generation of Afrikaner architects. Similar churches were constructed across the Free State and the Transvaal by Hendrik Vermooten, Johan de Ridder and others. They worked in a recognisable

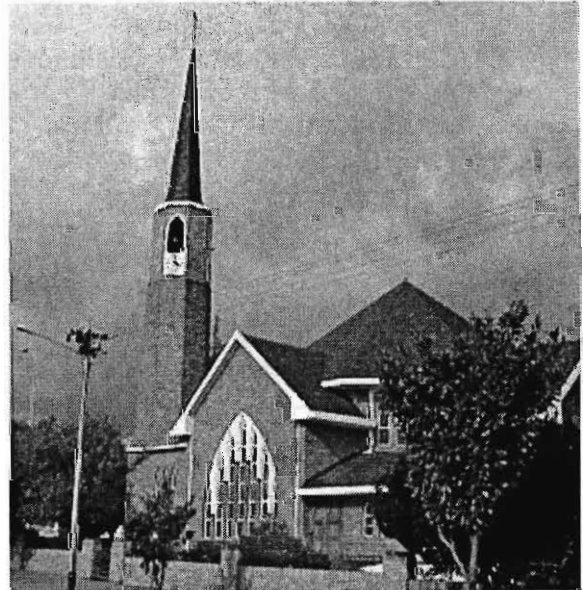


Figure 13. Hendrik Vermooten, Randfontein. (1950s)

Moerdijkian idiom. Examples are to be found in Klerksdorp, Ventersdorp, Randfontein and Pretoria.

### Secular architecture

It is said that Moerdijk designed the new municipal building in Klerksdorp (1949) in one week. His assistants then took over and executed the building. Purportedly, this was the last major building he was personally involved in. (Vermeulen, 1999: 147.)

The municipal building complex was designed as a monument in a featureless town, visible from the suburbs, symbolising law and order and the presence of

white local government. The building and formally designed gardens cover more than a city block streets on four sides. Central to the composition of the main façade is a brick tower ("belfry"?) visible from most of the formally white parts of the town. The main entrance to the civic complex is through the base of the tower.

The complex resembles a smorgasbord of architectural intentions and idiomatic expression, ranging from references to Sir Percy Thomas' City Hall, Swansea (1930-34), Moerdijk's own lugubrious *platteland* churches and the colonnaded Musee d'Art Moderne of the Paris Exposition (1925).



Figure 14. Municipal Building, Klerksdorp. 1949

The spatial sequences are contradictory – a monumental Versailles-like approach on the axis of the tower terminates in a narrow, constipated entrance hall, no more than a widened corridor. From the hall two symmetrical curved Art Deco staircases rise below a glass dome

(reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright) to another corridor where a narrow bridge leads to the council chamber. The council chamber, a dark wood-paneled hall, filled with straight-laced high-backed chairs, recalls the somber ecclesiastical interiors of Moerdijk's churches. The floor plan of the building is organised as a double loaded corridor arranged symmetrically along perpendicular axes.

Regrettably, the building completed in 1949 does not represent Moerdijk's finest hour, although at the opening Minister Tom Naude, a faithful supporter, proclaimed that "hierdie gebou van Moerdijk (is) seker die mooiste stadsaal ... wat ek nog ooit gesien het". (Vermeulen. 1999. 147.)

### Particular and specific features of each style-phase

#### Classic revival

Owing to his training at the Architectural Association and the *Zeitgeist*, Moerdijk started his career working in the Classic Revival style.

Just as Baker and the Bakerites did, he borrowed architectural styles from the past freely – classical elements such as Renaissance-inspired domes, pinnacles, the orders, pilasters, arches, loggias, pediments and towers were applied in a variety of combinations. In the typical classical tradition the building facades were symmetrical. The plans were based on classic "Platonic" volumes and geometry, such as the square, octagon, pyramid, cube and sphere. His interior space modulation was also based on classical precedent, the domed Greek cross, vaulted niches and colonnaded loggias.

Like the Bakerites, Moerdijk built with traditional materials such as local granite, sandstone, plaster, Rhodesian Teak, kiaat and Cordoba

tiles. Unlike the Bakerite buildings, which were usually opulent and richly decorated, Moerdijk's work was generally more restrained; a restraint most likely dictated by economics. Notwithstanding limited construction budgets, Moerdijk created massive and monumental ecclesiastical architecture – often the church building dominated the skyline of the local dorp in the same way the Gothic cathedral dominated French and English medieval towns and cities.

Moerdijk's classical buildings were usually freestanding pavilions, irrespective of whether they were built in urban or rural environments. Moerdijk practised the "Big Bang Theory" when placing a building in space and in the landscape.

Moerdijk created dark, moody interiors. His aim was to establish an atmosphere suitable for serious human activity, such as religious worship. The same seriousness and lack of humour permeate his secular architecture.

### Art Deco

After he had visited the United States in 1928, the outward appearance of Moerdijk's buildings changed – relatively elaborate combinations of classical elements, such as the orders, loggias and pitched tile roofs were replaced by massive, stark, slightly raked masonry walls, flat roofs, narrow vertical perforations and massive foundation plinths.

Although Moerdijk now worked in a different style, his buildings were still conceived, with the exception of the Reserve Bank, as isolated pavilions dominating the landscape. Conceptually, his Art Deco buildings were emulations of classical prototypes, e.g., the Italian cortiled *Palazzo* or *Campo Santo*. He continued to emulate, irrespective of the function of the building, the classical Renaissance *palazzo* plan

type – the main apartments were located on a *piano nobile* with rooms wrapped around a central courtyard. Similarly, his notions of site design remained unchanged – the Voortrekker Monument is perhaps the most provocative example of the "Big Bang" approach to placing a monument in the landscape.

Moerdijk raised his buildings on a heavy plinth – usually granite recalling the Biblical reference to building on a rock to secure permanence.

The expression of his work also evolved – whereas his classical churches were massive, monumental structures, his Art Deco buildings are fortresses where massive impenetrable walls enclose the treasures of the Afrikaner nation - books, capital or the past.

### Modernist

During the late 1940s and early 1950s Moerdijk started to build in a Modernist idiom, although the plan form of churches and office buildings remained classical in inspiration. He based the design of office buildings on the double loaded corridor prototype and repeated the tried formula of the Greek cross, dome and vaulted apse in new churches. Moerdijk continued to build in traditional materials, such as stone, face brick, local wood and plaster. The tower became central to the organisation of secular and ecclesiastical architecture – the tower was central to the symmetrical composition of the façade. The buildings were also entered at the base of the tower.

Moerdijk's Modernist buildings were conceived as symmetrical and axial objects. Essentially, his form of Modernism was to create a classical parti enclosed in a "contemporary" envelope. Interestingly enough, unlike the theories developed by the "Modernists" during the 1930s and



1940s, where buildings were regarded as universal, mass produced, expressive of their function and structure, devoid of ornament and designed from the inside out, Moerdijk continued to make buildings in the classical tradition he was trained in. In the tradition of Luytgens and Baker his public buildings were approached axially and ascended by means of a formal stair.

Moerdijk continued to create dark, brooding interiors. He considered worship or governance as serious human activities. Modernist, Art Deco and classical Moerdijk share the same moody, depressive ambiance - the building interiors recall morbid building types such as the grave, the mortuary or the museum.

### **“Volkseie argitektuur”**

Perhaps under the influence of German architects during the 1930s, Moerdijk strove to express “symbolic” meaning through his architecture – he attempted, by his own admission, “to cast in stone”, ideas such as “security”, “stability”, “Reformation”, “law and order”, “governance” and “faith” through architectural form and detail. He saw architecture as a medium, such as poetry or painting, to transmit messages. His architecture stood for an idea. He attempted to communicate something “meaningful” to the observer of his buildings. He applied decorative detail and images on the facades to represent “water”, “Africa” and other themes thought appropriate.

In *The origin and development of the Old Dutch Style in South Africa and its influence on the architecture there* Moerdijk argued that the collective feeling and aspiration of a nation were reflected in its architecture. By his own account, he attempted to create “volkseie argitektuur”.

The notion of style *per se* in the creation of a national architectural

idiom was not an issue for Moerdijk – it was important to adhere to certain “directives”. According to Moerdijk’s statements, architectural style will automatically follow if the directives have been followed. For example, climatic constraints and the use of local resources (building materials, labour and technology) shape architectural style. Arguably, Moerdijk built with local materials and technology and his buildings were designed to suit the local climate – however, architectural elements, stylistic inventions and references were borrowed indiscriminately.

In his search to create symbols to represent the Afrikaner, Moerdijk garnered a variety of established architectural styles, materials and ideas, which he heterogeneously pasted together. According to Du Preez and Swart of the University of the Free State, “Moerdijk is dikwels gekritiseer vir sy soms onkritiese eklektisisme, die sogenaamde ‘fruit salad’ benadering.” (Vermeulen, 1999: 138-139.)

Moerdijk must have realised that architecture is largely an imitative art – yet, unlike many, he did not instinctively know how to transform and interpret the ideas and forms to create “volkseie argitektuur”. Throughout his career his interpretations remained pragmatic and literal. He was generally unable to capture the ephemeral nature of form. Perhaps he realised this and his rationalised abstruse symbolism was an attempt to induce meaning in what otherwise would have remained a mute expression of the pragmatic.

Yet, on the other hand, the contrary could be true – Moerdijk might actually have captured the essence of his society at the time. He certainly did not create a recognisable South African style – his building *oeuvre* consists of a vast collection of classical, Art Deco and Modernist-inspired artefacts. Moerdijk saw



himself as an Afrikaner nationalist, a white *Übermensch*. It is possible that he could not develop a South African style because he was hamstrung by his Eurocentric bias. In light of the foregoing, one could argue that in terms of Moerdijk's place in history, he did create an architectural idiom reflective of the aspirations of his people. White South Africans looked "overseas" for artistic and cultural inspiration. They saw themselves as Europeans on the African continent. In that context, Moerdijk's "*volkseie argitektuur*" was truly South African – Eurocentric, eclectic, separatist and sadly devoid of the fecundity that is to be found in true art; the ability to unite.

Because Moerdijk was a pioneer practising at a time when few Afrikaners were sophisticated, he was awarded commissions and accolades not necessarily in proportion to his talents. He worked in a cultural context where the church and the Afrikaner elite were involved in establishing a Heimat, overcoming white poverty and "solving" the problem of the "*swart gevaar*". Within this context, Moerdijk gave form to the latent aspirations of his people – his "*volkseie*" monuments are dark, depressing places devoid of humour and life. 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 his intentions, Moerdijk created artefacts true to his place at the time in Africa – empty and imperfect.

## Notes

1. The quotation is from a lecture by Moerdijk in Bloemfontein (1922) entitled "The origin and development of the Old Dutch Style in South Africa and its influence on the architecture there". (Vermeulen, 1999: 49)
2. Sir Herbert Baker was invited as the guest of honour to a Transvaal Institute of South African Architects dinner, held at the Carlton Hotel on 15 August 1927. A short article in

"The South African Architectural Record" of September 1927 pointedly referred to Moerdijk's use of Afrikaans.

3. The Church at Wolmaransstad was opened by General J.G. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture, on 23 June 1928. The foundation stone at the Merensky Library was laid by General J.C. Smuts on 11 October 1937. The building was opened by Advocate H.A. Fagan, Minister of Education, on 15 April 1939.
4. A black line-drawing of the façade, without any text, only identifying Moerdijk as the author, appeared in "The South African Architectural Record", September 1925, Volume 10, Number 39.
5. G.E. Pearse in "The South African Architectural Journal" of June 1926, Volume 11, Number 42 published the "First premiated designs" for a new town hall.
6. The Merensky Library is used as a museum at present. The sculptures of Edoardo Villa are on permanent exhibition. The juxtaposition of Moerdijk's anally retentive interior and Villa's sexually explosive figures is worth a visit.
7. Reference is made to Moerdijk's statement, quoted by Vermeulen, with regard to the Voortrekker Monument. (Vermeulen, 1999: 90) The Voortrekker Monument may well stand for a thousand years, unlike the Nationalist Government's forty-five years of contumacious rule.

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