Current trends in South African architecture and the way to the future

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Few countries have ever had the opportunity to rethink their architectural dogma as abruptly and radically as South Africa since the few years leading up to the democratic elections of 1994. With only a few exceptions, the pre-democratic South African architecture of the 20th century has always lacked a unique identity. But, coinciding with trends towards Critical-Regionalism and 'green' initiatives, the emergence of a new South Africa has inspired the profession as a whole to search for new directions.
Keywords: South African urbanism and architecture, informal settlement, regional identity

Hedendaagse tendense in Suid-Afrikaanse argitektuur en die weg na die toekoms
Net enkele lande het ooit die geleentheid gehad om hul argitektoniese dogma so plotseling en radikaal te heroorweeg as Suid-Afrika in die paar jare voor die demokratiese verkiesing van 1994. Met slegs enkele uitsonderings het die voor-demokratiese Suid-Afrikaanse argitektuur nog altyd aan 'n unieke identiteit ontbreek. Maar saamvallend met tendense na '*Critical-Regionalism*' en 'groen' inisiatiewe het die ontwaking van 'n 'nuwe' Suid-Afrika die professie as 'n geheel begeester om vir nuwe rigtings te soek.
Sleutelwoorde: Suid-Afrikaanse stedelikheid en argitektuur, informele nedersetting, streeksidentiteit

This paper describes a number of trends that are clearly intended to reinterpret and redefine the way buildings and their appurtenant spaces are perceived and used. In one way or another, their architects all attempt, whether explicitly or by implication, to understand the functional, physical and psychological criteria for a truly South African architecture.

A brief introduction and theoretical framework is followed by a review of the relevant trends under the following headings: (1) Participation, (2) Mediterranean, (3) Vernacularised Modernism, and (4) Contextualised Modernism. It will be demonstrated that the projects under scrutiny all have considerable validity in the South African situation, and that their success as architectural creations depends mainly on the manner in which the project brief is satisfied, whether a convincing contextual fit and sense of place is achieved and, perhaps most importantly, whether social purpose (symbolism and meaning) have been adequately addressed.

Finally, we should ask: considering the unquestionable tendency towards increasing globalisation in matters such as consumerism, communications, fashions, tastes and travel, especially in the cities, is a unique South African architecture really necessary? And considering our global economic and political aspirations, as well as our quest for equality, modernity and progress, is it desirable?

By 1880 European colonisation − the 'scramble for Africa' – had commenced and for the next 70 years colonists dominated, not only politically, but also by means of their towns and cities, conceived to exploit the region in support of European-based industrialism. In South Africa, as in many other parts of colonial sub-Saharan Africa, authorities used Garden City planning and zoning to ensure racial segregation. Today the business and commercial cores in most of Africa's capital cities look very much like those found all over the world: their suburbs are also centred on mega-malls, and affluent households (of all races) also seek refuge in gated villages and golf estates. On the peripheries, townships are sometimes found with rows of identical box-like low-cost housing, but more frequently sprawling, amorphous informal settlements. The characteristics that render our urban landscape 'African' are (1) the way hawkers occupy territory wherever people congregate, often in front of large, formal shops and institutions, and (2) the way informal settlements are shaped and inhabited.

Not only in South Africa, but all over sub-Saharan Africa, the built environment professions were ignorant of, or ignored, indigenous building traditions, although, even before the demise of the International Style, certain architects did refer to elements such as, for example, the chevron patterns found at Great Zimbabwe. In rare instances, abstract interpretations of the pattern of the traditional homestead – separate huts with conical thatched roofs situated around an open court –formed the basic concept. Although certain early commentators lamented the general lack of identity in South African architecture, the nature of an African identity only became an issue for debate and design in the middle 1990s.

Today the statutory body regulating the teaching, learning and practising of architecture in South Africa recognises that the profession's mandate now ranges from the design of large complex groups of buildings and their urban relationships, to small-scale interventions in informal settlements. Officially, it has shifted from purely 'high design' Eurocentric dogma, such as Nikolaus Pevsner's "A bicycle shed is a building, Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture" (1963: 15), and now generally supports a more generic definition: "The art and science of building" (Bartuska & Young 1994: 138).

Apart from the fact that this approach is clearly influenced by the appreciation of unselfconscious traditional forms that has emerged since Amos Rapoport (1969) wrote the theoretical framework for the study of vernacular architecture, entitled *House Form and Culture*, it is also aligned with Critical-Regionalism in its broadest sense.

South Africa is no longer a European colonial outpost: it is an African country ruled by Africans and with black Africans constituting the vast majority of its citizens. But it also possesses a significant and substantial European and Asian heritage. Does our architecture reflect that 'Africanness' as well as its intertwined legacies? Considering the globalisation of values, tastes and communications, does it have to reflect that?

Bearing in mind South Africa's layered histories, socio-economic plurality and geographic extremes, there can be no doubt that the country needs a number of architectural directions that will inevitably not always be complementary or compatible. That dichotomy will always be part of our built environment. Generally, architects agree that buildings should be suited to climates and customs. Big business, major contractors and large budgets demand an established kind of project, but considering the imperative to provide adequate housing, health care, governance, policing, recreation, education and employment opportunities, there is clearly a need for a genre of low-energy buildings that reflect our specific economic, functional and aesthetic requirements, which can be built with locally-available materials by local contractors using semi-skilled labour.

What must good architecture achieve? First of all, it must offer functional and aesthetic solutions to the real problems impacting on the project. It must unambiguously reveal its intended use and spatial organisation. Secondly, a good building must respond appropriately to the physical, natural, socio-political and historical context. Finally, good architecture must always be more than utilitarian: it must also communicate on an emotional level.

Theoretical framework

This study is not a discourse along the line of Charles Jencks' (1981) style-dominated categorisation; especially not one of Post-Modernism, which he promoted as a reaction to the supposed failure and flaws of Modernism. My main criteria are informed by authors such as Henry Matthews (1994) and Noel Moffett (1994) whose approach I find considerably more holistic and substantial. Francisco Asensio (2007) and Francisco Cerver (2003) both avoid

'-isms' in their seminal compendiums of contemporary architecture world-wide and, rather, discuss their selected buildings in terms of form, function, technology, intentions and impact. Both emphasise the great variety of trends; globalisation is clearly not producing a new, uniform 'International Style'!

This study focuses on four current trends and attempts to determine design intentions, interpretations and subsequent expressions of architecture appropriate to the South African condition. The perceived strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm are briefly discussed. The illustrated projects have been randomly selected, but they are all generally valued by both the public and the profession.

The four trends are broadly arranged from the most overtly 'African' (participation in informal settlement) to the exact polar opposite, pseudo-Mediterranean and neo-Classicism, followed by two 'in-between' streams: Vernacularised Modernism, and Contextualised Modernism, with the latter being the most incontestably 'international' in conceptualisation and visual impact. 'Participation', in terms of this study, refers to small projects initiated by the community itself or by non-governmental organisations, where professionals and local people collaborate with one another. These constitute projects intended to improve social space and provide essential amenities. 'Mediterranean' is a somewhat mischievous inclusion, referring to both buildings with a pseudo Mediterranean origin and Neo-Classicist schemes. Although dismissed by academia, it is nevertheless a populist trend that, together with informal townships, is a very prominent phenomenon in the built environment. The line between vernacularised and contextualised Modernism is blurred. These are simply extensions of the Modernist project, with different foci along a trajectory; the difference, however, is simply a matter of interpretation. The term 'contextualism' is arguably more relevant than 'regionalism' in South Africa. Regionalism is still valid for certain vernacular types, but contemporary buildings must respond to historical, demographic and physical conditions which might differ radically between sites that are within walking distance of one another. Contextualism is, therefore, closely related to regionalism, but represents a common overall image on a smaller scale. These positions should rather be called 'directions' than 'paradigms' in order to denote their dynamic, evolving, responsive and open-ended nature. The four directions have admittedly been labelled somewhat arbitrarily. The projects cannot be neatly distinghuished since there is considerable overlap while even conceptual similarities exist between them.

1. Participation in informal settlement

In South Africa, the presumed economic power-house of Africa, nearly a fifth of its population live in shacks, called informal dwellings, a type of residence that the government pledged to eradicate by building vast low-density dormitory suburbs on the fringes of cities (figure 1). Since the backlog was estimated at 2.6 million units in 1994, an incredible 2.3 million Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses have been built, but still the informal settlements continue to mushroom. What is truly significant is that there are more (57 per cent) "ultra-poor" people living in these subsidised, and sometimes free, houses than in the informal settlements (Brown & Fölscher 2004: 76-80). Could this furnish evidence that shack dwellers have achieved a higher level of economic self-sufficiency than those relying on welfare grants? It certainly appears to be so. African cities have never enjoyed an adequate economic basis with which to absorb the growing number of poor people. Neither big business nor government has ever been substantial employers in the region. The livelihood of a large and growing number of urban people depends utterly on an informal economy – artisans and technicians in home industries,

and hawkers and small traders who establish street markets wherever there might be a demand for their wares and services.

Figure 1
Informal settlement in Mamelodi, Tshwane (photograph by author).

It is easy for a visitor to be touched by the vibrant atmosphere in an informal settlement, especially along such traders' routes. The friendliness of the people and their innovativeness while they attempt to make a living is inspirational. Starting with John Turner (1976), many authoritative sources have stressed the value of such settlements. In South Africa, David Dewar (2000) has been advocating for years that "informality should be celebrated", insisting that government's current policy is simply aggravating the problem (2000). Locally, Alan Lipman (2003: 156) has also recognised that informal settlements are viable urban models. Henry Matthews and Bashir Kazimee (1994: 133) propose that "reality suggests that this type of settlement is perhaps the only affordable method to provide shelter for the urban poor and will continue to be the way that the majority of urban dwellers in third-world cities use to solve their quest for shelter". Even Geoffrey Broadbent (1990: 349-350), a prominent historian and theorist firmly in the Eurocentric mould writes: "[Self-build] is the cheapest possible kind of dwelling since the labour costs are literally zero". He adds: "How much richer the cities of the developed world would be if zones were given over to self-built with the minimum of planning, and even constructional constraints …".

Complacency would, however, be irresponsible; we must recognise the risks involved in living in a squatter camp. The lack of access to education, healthcare and viable economic opportunities relegates these communities to the very lowest levels of human needs. The deficiency of basic services such as sanitation, potable water and clean electricity presents a severe health hazard, exacerbated by the climatic unsuitability of their densely-packed, overcrowded makeshift shacks with their lack of thermal insulation and cross ventilation. What can we do in such situations?

A number of South African architects are in fact making a huge difference with small, cost-effective interventions. Thorsten Deckler and Peter Rich's urban design plans for Bekkersdal offer an example of how the public realm can be improved at very little cost (figure 2). Piet Louw's design for a public bath house in Nyanga constitutes an example of a new type of building that could improve quality of life (figure 3).

Figure 2
Thorsten Deckler and Peter Rich: Urban design interventions at Bekkersdal (sketch by Peter Rich).

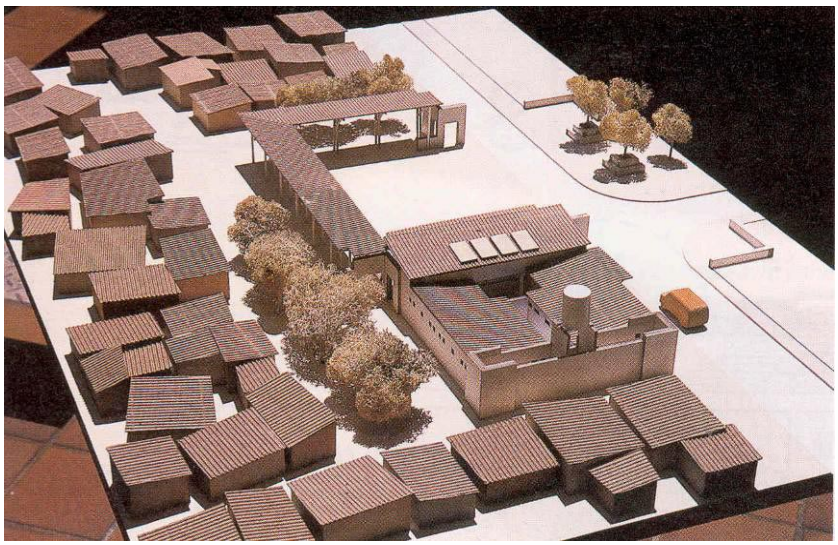

Figure 3
Piet Louw Architect, Urban Designer, City Planner: Nyanga bath house, Cape Town
(*SA Architect*, 2001 Project Awards, September/October 2001: 28).

Although the climate is temperate, shacks can be very uncomfortable in extreme summer and winter situations. Proper site planning to achieve the correct orientation of buildings and an appropriate spacing between them, the provision of cellulose fibre (recycled paper) wall and roof insulation and plasterboard roof and wall panelling, cross ventilation and the shading of walls could achieve relatively comfortable conditions. Other measures, such as proper substructures, connections and fastening techniques, would vastly improve comfort, health and safety levels. This is an active field of research in South Africa and a substantial body of knowledge is becoming available.

In order to allow greater participation by households and individuals, the indigenous knowledge of both informal and traditional construction should be reconsidered (figure 4). Both technologies are inherently sustainable, since they rely on recycling and renewable resources. A very specific graphic style has developed in South Africa over the years for use in instruction manuals aimed at semi-literate and even illiterate people, but the need for on-site support and advice, provided by architects and technologists with the skills to communicate with newly-arrived migrants, has now become urgent.

Figure 4
Traditional thatch-and-mud hut and framed shack with metal sheet cladding (photograph by Konrad Steyn).

Charles Correa (1989: 112), an Indian architect and activist who received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1998, complains that people sometimes think that the poor have no aesthetic sense. That is obviously a totally false perception. He stresses the value of the architect's service to poor people and writes: "What [poor] communities need is not just our compassion, but our professional, (i.e. visual and topological) skills". Helping the poor is, therefore, as much an aesthetic exercise as architecture can hope to achieve, and there are many examples of hawker-stalls, bus-stops, cookeries offering bovine heads – a host of small, essentially utilitarian shelter types – that are well proportioned and crafted.

2. Mediterranean

Many South African architects have to cope with commissions for "Tuscan" houses and "Roman" buildings. The origins of this mass, populist preference can only be speculated, but it is unquestionably entrenched in the public psyche as the most desirable 'style'. In the United States a small number of popular styles also dominate specific regions. As Andres Duany says: "I have found that people everywhere, whether they're recent immigrants from Mexico, blacks from the inner city of St Louis, wealthy people from the outskirts of Philadelphia, all want the same thing. They are all extremely conservative and want predictability in their architectural expression" (quoted in Economakis 1993: 15).

South Africans of all races and socio-economic standings are predominantly suburbanites. And the model that even the poorest shack-dweller aspires to is the freestanding house. While academics relentlessly attack the "Tuscanisation" of our residential architecture, the suburbs and gated communities substantiate the conclusion that the majority of middle and higher income home-owners prefer that style. Even black home-owners – once they have security of tenure – often replace their shacks with houses in what can only be described as "somewhat Mediterranean" (figure 5).

Figure 5
Private house in a low-income suburb of Mamelodi (photograph by author).

It is ironical that the houses bearing such a label mostly do not even vaguely resemble the Tuscan villas and farmhouses of that region. The tasteless and overdone stuck-on decorations and the fibre-cement sewer pipes with their precast capitals and bases that are such prominent features as the columns of the double-storey *porte-cochere* (which seem *de rigueur*) are simply in bad taste, while the clipped overhangs ruin wooden windows in our Highveld downpours and are patently impractical.

Figure 6
Designers unknown: Avianto, an attractive resort near Muldersdrift (photograph by author).

Even so, is it really so bad? Apart from the practical considerations and the invasive nature of these styles, who are we to judge the collective taste of a nation? We are situated about as far south of the Equator as the Mediterranean is to the north of it. We can learn from that vernacular about the informal flow of spaces, the light and airy interiors, the indoor-outdoor relationships

and the use of transitional spaces, such as loggias. The seemingly informal and incremental massing demarcates protected and private outdoor living spaces that are eminently appropriate in our climate. While it is inconceivable that such a design assignment would ever pass muster at a local school of architecture, there are indeed buildings that demonstrate restraint and considerable compositional skills, as well as offering a pleasant spatial and visual experience (figure 6).

Not only home-owners and resort operators but also most of the foreign embassies in Pretoria, the diplomatic centre of South Africa, reflect Mediterranean aspirations. While some also adopt the irregular massing of the residential schemes, the bigger ones are grander, with more obvious Classicist intentions. At an institutional level we find that Revel Fox's design for the Bellville Campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology employs all the classicist compositional devices – as well as faux columns (figure 7). However, these have been sparingly used and are actually of the smooth, tapered Tuscan order popularised by Palladio. In fact, a monograph on the work of the architect states that "design and detailing make clear reference to a collegiate classicism while the interplay of symmetry, axiallity and order, and the harmony of material, colour and texture combine to give a sense of equanimity and delight" (Fox 1998: 154-155). It is a tasteful, elegant complex which accords dignity to the place and the process of learning. The staff and teachers are immensely proud of it. Consequently, there are obviously good as well as bad Mediterranean-inspired buildings. Success in this controversial idiom depends on the architect's sensibilities and the need to avoid excesses.

Figure 7
Revel Fox and Partners: Bellville Campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Fox 1998: 155).

3. Vernacularised modernism

The Neo-Vernacular approach originated as a Post-Modernist derivative and is manifested in the picturesque application and integration of elements derived from the vernacular, both pre-colonial and industrial. In most of Europe and the United States this remains popular and is closely associated with the New Urbanism, Urban Village and *Les Quartier* movements. What are our precedents for indigenous buildings? The thatched mud hut? While artists like Hendrik Pierneef greatly admired the type, urban blacks considered it backward even in the 1950s. Even so, thatched buildings with decorations that vaguely resemble Africa continue to delight tourists. When SA Airlink appointed architect Oliver Wills to "Africanise" Phalaborwa Airport he used an anthropomorphic plan form (reminiscent of the Dogon) to fuse airport typology and lodge morphology (*SA Architect*, May/June 2003: 32). While some academics might find this literal interpretation objectionable, it is nevertheless compatible with Lowveld climatic conditions and building traditions (figure 8).

Architect Errol Pieters achieved a good fit with his lodge proposal at the exclusive Welgevonden Nature Reserve in the Limpopo Province, but combined a wholly pragmatic approach with an abstract and imaginative interpretation of what a contemporary thatched roof building complex should look like (figure 9). Both projects claim to be informed by Critical Regionalism, and both approaches have their detractors and admirers.

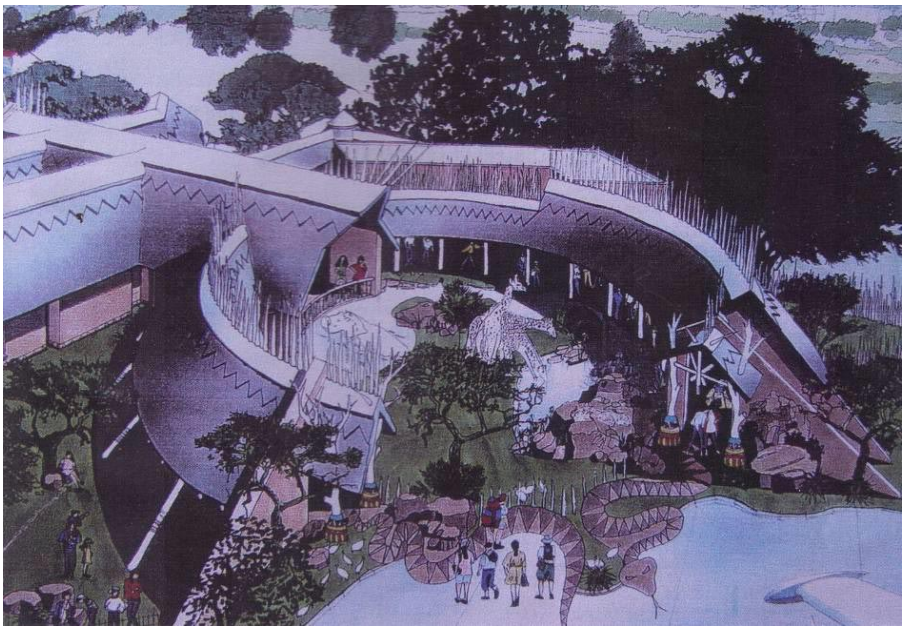

Figure 8
Oliver Wills Architect: Phalaborwa Airport (*SA Architect*, May/June 2003: 33).

Figure 9
Errol Pieters Architect: proposed lodge (courtesy: Errol Pieters).

The line between small-scale interventions in townships and squatter camps, and larger projects used predominantly by black people – whether inside a historically black township or not – is understandably blurred. Such buildings include *muti* (traditional medicine) and informal markets, minibus taxi ranks, pension pay points, adult education centres and many others. Many architects view such an appointment as an opportunity to celebrate the notion of an 'African place' by referring to the vernacular. Apart from the purely historical value, what architects hope to achieve by studying vernacular architecture is insight into ideas and formative concepts. Robert Maguire stated at a RIBA conference in 1976 that "Vernacular is not a style…it can't be copied. The significance of the vernacular is as a learning tool" (quoted in Jencks & Kropf 1997: 172-173). Important lessons include the use of appropriate materials and a straightforward approach in order to achieve both architectural complexity and human scale.

This is what architects Albonico, Sack and Mzumara, in association with MMA Architects, achieved with their muti-market and taxi-rank, situated at the Faraday Precinct in the south-eastern part of the Johannesburg CBD (figure 10). This is undeniably an 'African' place, not simply because of its function and clientele, but also because of its forms and finishes, as well as abstract representations of indigenous graphic motifs. However, the architects responded to another dimension. They recognised that South Africans are not dour; they are exuberant, friendly, hospitable and outdoor-loving people. So, while the taxi-rank communicates 'advanced long-span engineering' the detailing of street furniture, *muti*-market and appurtenant buildings emphasises the fluidity of space through the threshold-free connection to the exterior, and also the informality of the trading system by abolishing counters.

Figure 10
Albonico, Sack and Mzumara, in association with MMA Architects: A walkway in the *muti* market section of the Faraday Precinct (photograph by the author).

The Mokhele Art Therapy Centre in Soweto provides counselling for traumatised children through play and the creative use of materials (figure 11). Architect Kate Otten intended this building as an artwork and a fun place for children, yet also one offering tranquil retreats. She reinterpreted and combined rural forms and makeshift squatter morphology, and created the desired aesthetic, spatial and sensory effects in an informal, organic manner.

Because the building creates a familiar and healing territory for children, it works. But in most building types where the aesthetics are deliberately "shackey", emulating the informal morphology, where cheap and non-durable materials are specified and where detailing is sloppy, the architect heads for dangerous ground. The intentions in such cases are clearly to create predictable and recognisable environments by deriving their inspiration from current shantytowns and with the aim of achieving cost savings. Such buildings are also aimed at a construction process using local materials, technologies and contractors; poor communities do not seem to appreciate that. They tend to view such projects as mocking their poverty and their

desperate efforts to improvise with what is free and readily available. They also invariably suspect that the architect intends to perpetuate a kind of built environment that alludes to backwardness, technological incompetence and a general sense of illiteracy and immaturity.

Figure 11
Kate Otten Architect: Mokhele Art Therapy Centre.
(*Leading Architecture*, July/August 2004: 42).

A vernacular-inspired approach becomes especially difficult with large buildings. Sub-Saharan African countries have very few examples for reference; the great ancient mosques of West Africa are, mostly, approximately 2,000 square metres in area. Husuni Kubwa in Kilwa, Tanzania, (13th century) was a highly articulated building with a footprint of about one hectare. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe with their bold scaling and organic layout are of course not those of a building, but rather an urban artefact. While the perimeter occupies more than 18 hectares, the Great Enclosure defines about three hectares. Locally, the traditional homesteads offer a limited range of forms and patterns, and certain architects derive their vernacular elements from as far away as Nigeria, Mali, Ethiopia and Cameroon. Can those countries be a valid source of precedents? The problem here is not so much that of implied collective memories and histories; rather it implies a pan-African culture – in other words, a common black culture − which is an extremely tenuous argument.

Architects Colin Savage and Heather Dodd avoided those pitfalls in their social housing projects at the Brickfields Social Housing Precinct near the Metro Mall Taxi Rank and Newtown Cultural Precinct (figure 12). The complex illustrated below is a 350 unit mixed-use perimeter block development, completed in 2006. Rather than attempting to 'Africanise' the design it (perhaps unintentionally) displays some Alexandrine patterns that have certain 'universal' relevance. A few come to mind: pattern 10 – magic of the city; pattern 11 – local transport areas; pattern 14 – identifiable neighbourhood; pattern 35 – household mix; pattern 39 – housing hill; pattern 87 – individually owned shops; pattern 93 – food stands; pattern 95 – building complex; pattern 102 – family of entrances; pattern 104 – site repair; pattern 106 – positive outdoor space; pattern 108 – connected buildings; pattern 112 – entrance transition; pattern 116 – cascade of roofs; pattern 122 – building fronts; pattern 133 – staircase as a stage, and many more (Alexander et al. 1977).

Figure 12
Savage + Dodd Architects: Brickfields Social Housing Precinct (photograph by the author).

One of the first and seminal buildings in this mode was of course Ralph Erskine's Byker Wall Housing Estate in Newcastle, Great Britain, completed in 1976. The different materials, colours and textures, the articulated form and modulated elevations served to break down the massiveness associated with post-World War II social housing blocks. Charles Jencks (1981: 104) mentions Erskine's familiarity with the neo-vernacular, discusses his ad hoc style (which he claims Erskine turned into an art form) and finally describes Byker's wall as a "key Post-Modern project". Moffett (1994: 145-146), on the other hand, describes the approach as "modified modern". It is amazing how rhetorical and debatable labelling has become in architecture! All the projects in this section, and the next, are conceptually and intellectually Modernist ones; their typologies, circulation and spatial organisations irrefutably attest to that.

4. Contextualised modernism

Colin Savage and Heather Dodd's approach is eminently suitable for housing schemes where the building block represents a dwelling-size module, but a different approach is needed for building complexes that are large simply because of their function. Such a project was the Metro Mall Taxi/bus rank and traders' market in Johannesburg created by Urban Solutions Architects and Urban Designers, completed in 2002 (figure 13). The complex occupies a 2.6 hectare site near Newtown and provides facilities for 1,800 taxis and 800 traders and retailers.

Again no effort was made to 'Africanise' it; the use of red facebrick, off-shutter concrete, brushed steel, heavy timber and profiled steel sheeting rather "acknowledge Johannesburg's mining and industrial history – continuing a familiar palette and re-asserting the urban context" (*Architecture SA*, November/December 2002: 11-17). The descriptions "Mining and industrial history", as well as "familiar palette", hint at some appreciation of the vernacular. The building is testimony that this is a valid and efficient approach if competently executed. After all, Christian Norberg-Schulz (1985:26-29) defines morphology as the formal articulation of a type

by concretising its spatial boundaries In other words, even a thoroughly Modernist building can be 'vernacularised' by modulating the envelope.

Figure 13
Urban Solutions Architects and Urban Designers: Metro Mall in Johannesburg (photograph by the author).

Described as "possibly the most significant [public building] to be built since Sir Herbert Baker's Union Buildings", the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg by omm design workshop (Andrew Makin and Janina Masojada) in association with Urban Solutions, is a building that reflects physical, psychological and political contextualisation (figure 14). It is also controversial. A review states that "the Constitutional Court presents itself with certain contradictory messages. It is an uneasy tension between Western systemic law and the notion of cultural tribal law", while "the scale of the building is not prepared to be bold, the fabric is fragmented and the detailing domestic" (*Architecture SA*, November/December 2004: 81-84). More recently the citation of the SAIA Awards of Excellence, however, reads "The new Constitutional Court is a remarkable realisation of small narratives" (*Architecture SA*, September/October 2006: 24).

The said court is also a product of the exploratory and pioneering spirit that marked the immediate post-apartheid period. The *Digest of South African Architecture*, edited by Iain Low, an astute observer and commentator, is a realistic barometer of the state of our architecture. The review of work completed in 2002 was themed "Emerging identities" and that of 2004/2005 "Space and transformation: 10 years of democracy". For 2006 it was simply "Moving on". While some important early 'democratic' buildings show an agonising and desperate eagerness to relate to the newly liberated majority – sometimes with rather superficial and unconvincing iconography and decor − the trend is now certainly towards quieter, more confident tectonics.

A host of extremely competent buildings are not culturally coded at all – at least not in the ethnological sense (more about that further on), nor do they display any form of historicism. Instead they engage uncompromisingly with the physical context of the site; with its climate, its accessibility and its public spaces. They respond to the neighbouring morphology either by emulating the scale, massing and rhythm or by resorting to contrast.

Figure 14
omm design workshop: Constitutional Court in Johannesburg (photograph by the author).

The Lynedoch Community and Educational Centre near Spier Estate, close to Stellenbosch, by Alastair Rendall and Gita Goven, represents such a building (figure 14). It was intended to achieve ecological sustainability: effluent is processed for re-use, local waste is recycled, rockstores assist with heating and cooling, and ventilation relies on windcatchers, solar chimneys and Whirlybirds (*Leading Architecture*, November/December 2004: 40-41).

Figure 15
Designed by Alastair Rendall and Gita Goven: Lynedoch Community and Educational Centre, Stellenbosch (photograph by the author).

Achieving a good ecological fit is a major consideration today. Even in deep-plan buildings correct orientation and shading of windows could ease HVAC loads, and proper fenestration could improve day-lighting. Their tectonics and aesthetics tend to be more mature, neutral and controlled. These buildings do not shout – they tend to be good neighbours. GAPP's office and retail building enfronts the public square in front of Museum Africa in the Newtown Cultural Precinct (figure 16). The precinct is dedicated to African arts (visual and performing) and crafts, but instead of overtly acknowledging this, the building contributes to street life with ground floor shops, while its very simple morphology defers to that of the huge, abandoned industrial constructions (all due to be re-cycled soon) across the street.

Figure 16
GAPP Architects and Urban designers: office and retail building in Newtown (photograph by the author).

Figure 17
Noero Wolff Architects: PELIP Housing opposite the Museum of Struggle, Red Location, Port Elizabeth (photograph by the author)

Colossal, over-scaled buildings tend to be uniformly ugly, while managing the massing and scale of a big building in a fine-grained context, like a township or informal settlement, is always a challenge. The point is that a large, elegant, monumental building can bring presence and civic pride to a poor community, and if it draws visitors it can provide significant employment opportunities and other spin-offs. An example is the Museum of Struggle at the Red Location Cultural Precinct in Port Elizabeth by Jo Noero and Heinrich Wolff (figure 17).

It faces the PELIP scheme (Port Elizabeth Low Income Housing Project) designed by the same architects across a pedestrianised street. Here the aim was to achieve human scale in the two-storey terrace configuration by adopting narrow 2.75 and 3.4 metre frontages. The intention was to create a strong vertical facade so as to "create a sense of big space".

Completed in 2005, the Museum of Struggle, the first of five buildings to form the Red Location Cultural Precinct, is a big building (figure 18). Whereas the interiors and exhibitions are hauntingly disturbing, the typology points to intentions to create an asset with which the community can associate. At a physical level the materials reflect those of the surrounding areas. Socially and economically the building is intended as a backdrop for community activities with the eastern edge described as a "habitable wall". Similarly the entrance pergola is a public gathering space, while a generous grassed area inside the L-shape footprint features a large screen and provides outdoor cinema for 2,500 people.

Especially for larger, institutional buildings, this is the option that holds the most potential. It invites people to come closer and it responds to human scale and activities at ground level with the modulation of its elements: exactly the opposite message to that which the huge, bland, intimidating boxes that constitute our suburban malls convey to passing highway traffic.

Figure 18
Noero Wolff Architects: Museum of Struggle from the air (*Digest of SA Architecture*, 2005/2006: 12).

Is a unique South African architecture really necessary?

Alexander Tzonis (2006/2007: 216, 218) writes that "there are a number of important public spaces and civic facilities constructed during the last decade where the question of regionalist architecture has been already addressed creatively and critically, especially as it relates to

aspects of memory and identity", and "it seems that this new architecture in South Africa, while applying global technologies, is indeed responding to the [physical, cultural, and social] uniqueness of the region".

The physical and social uniqueness I can understand. But one may ask what is culture? Whose culture? Many authors tend to associate the term 'culture' with ethnic and racial origins and customs, which represents an outmoded Eurocentric approach rooted in colonialism. James Steele (2005: 125) writes that pseudoscience resulted in "false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East". The most glaring flaws in this approach are the notions of 'generalisation' (when variables like social, religious and geographical differences, as well as human variety are disregarded and replaced by a uniform schema) and 'synchronic essentialism' (the tendency to be ahistorical and to view behavioural patterns as timeless). Exactly the same principle applies to the Western perception of African culture.

Amos Rapoport (1982: 14-15) is one of the few sources offering a coherent theory of culture as a component of environment-behaviour. According to Rapoport the concept of culture encompasses two dimensions; the one based on world views and values is manifested in a person's life-style, the other in social variables concerning family roles and kinship. Ethnicity, race and class are considered "less useful", while life-style is "more useful" in determining that which is culture-specific. This is aligned with the belief of the authoritative Dutch philosopher, Van Peursen (1974: 8), who defines culture simply as "an expression of man's [sic] mode of living".

This principle is crucially important. A generation of black adolescents who were raised in mansions, attended private schools, have never been to a township, and do not have relatives or friends in rural villages are now growing up. There can be no question that their life-style preferences, that is, their cultural orientation, correspond with those of white adolescents of European descent (as well as Indians and "Coloureds") with similar backgrounds and exposures. At the same time, a large portion of South Africa's labour force is unemployed and nearly a third of households are living below the poverty line, unquestionably forced into a different kind of life-style to that of affluent households. Given this scenario, one can ask: What is the relationship here in terms of culture?

Sub-Saharan Africa's indigenous architecture was shaped at a time when custom and culture ruled isolated societies that were precariously dependent on good weather and collective action for survival. Behavioural patterns and the form and style of settlement constituted an extension of a narrow, conformist world-view. Today, even the remotest village people drink Coca-Cola, dream of owning Nike shoes or a Toyota, and discuss international football results. Such communities may be marginalised in many ways, but they certainly form part of a global communication and consumer network.

This global-village scenario is confirmed by Van Peursen (1974: 11), who writes in *The Strategy of Culture* of the phenomenon of an universally shared humanity that emerged because of the "cross-links between all cultures, whether past or present". This implies that even though life-styles differ, fundamental values tend to be the same. The rich and the poor – regardless of race – tend to share preferences, hopes and ideals in social, spiritual, political, material, educational and recreational matters (figure 19). The consequences for architecture are far-reaching: for our purpose, culture can be interpreted as the manner in which a community expresses its psyche: is it idealistic, confident, nostalgic, afraid, aggressive, exclusive, inclusive, domineering, caring, wealthy, proud, hospitable or hostile?

Figure 19
Street café at Melrose Arch – a setting for all cultures who can afford to be there (photograph by the author).

For final substantiation we should consider the work of black architects (of whom we still have far too few). Apart from the rising number of black practices, many firms have black partners, and most make use of black students and architects-in-training. Still, we do not witness an 'Africanisation' of new architecture. Have they been brainwashed by Eurocentric curricula? I do not think so. Black consciousness is so strong that it would have easily overcome this.

Figure 20
MMA Architects: South African Embassy in Berlin (Architecture SA, Nov/Dec 2005: 35).

Cerver (2003: 20) is adamant that "the concerns of architects are a response not so much to their training as to their vision of reality". Consider the work of MMA Architects, whose

partners include Mphethi Morojele and Luyanda Mphahla. Apart from their involvement with the Faraday Taxi Rank they were part of the Freedom Park consortium. They also designed the award-winning South African Chancellery in Berlin (figure 20). Rather than an 'out-of-Africa' approach, their intention was to create an image "appropriate to an efficient modern African administration at the forefront of the global arena" (*Digest of SA Architecture* 2004: 68-71).

Nick Coetzer writes that "there is nothing Kafkaesque" in Makeka Design Laboratory's railway police station at Retreat for the Cape Peninsula Metrorail (*Architecture SA*, November/December 2006: 22-24). Neither does it hint at an indigenous tradition. Rather, cognisant of memories of suppression and police brutality, it "presents itself to the public in a humanising and humanist manner". It also does so in a thoroughly Modernist manner (figure 21).

Figure 21
Makeka Design Laboratory: Railway Police station at Retreat (*Architecture SA*, November/December 2006: 23).

Just as I discovered to my consternation that a white cattle farmer from the North West Province − with its wide, stretched out veld and distant horizons − had a totally different spatial perception from an urbanite like myself, so black architects from backgrounds like my own will possess little understanding of the expectations of black people living in townships and informal settlements. The answer of course lies in proper research, intensive field work and community participation.

Without those underpinnings, architects too often try to demonstrate their "perceptiveness" of local conditions and their "understanding" of an appropriate architecture, as well as embracing an imagined opportunity to design in a careless "freestyle", emulating the shackey imagery. Not only do users and the public find this attitude paternalistic and distasteful, it also demonstrates ignorance of the true nature of our indigenous African architecture. Long before it became imperative, the South African architect and academic, Peter Stewart (1987: 51), maintained that there are lessons to be learned from settlements in most of Africa. He adds that the villages and clusters of black people are real examples of the human being's ingenuity and architectural achievement without professional intervention. What are these lessons? Clustered pavilions around open activity spaces (responding to climate and the privacy gradient), simple, straightforward, honest use of materials and articulation of forms, hierarchy of spaces, thresholds and circulation routes, subservience to, and respect for, the natural environment, a disregard for European Renaissance-like uniqueness, respect for neighbours, the fabric and custom, a quiet composition, colours and textures that blend rather than compete ... and **never** an architecture that shouts.

I sincerely believe that there are also some pertinent lessons to be learned from the Middle Eastern experience, even though the conditions might be totally opposite to ours. In most parts of the Middle East neo-traditional historicism is being rejected in favour of an aesthetic that proclaims progress and modernity. Current requirements focus on the prerequisite for architecture that it be responsive to climatic and social conditions as well as to people's values, needs and aspirations. Architecture also emphasises urban and building types that would

reintroduce walkability and social space, and would allow the cities of the region to respond to both local and global requirements for sustainability. This represents an agenda emanating from a developing region, and in like manner, that of South Africa.

The main differences are evident in that there are established building, village and city-making traditions many thousands of years old; that the courtyard and village typology can be easily modified to suit contemporary functionality; and that society is socio-economically relatively homogenous and shares a world-view dictated by the tenets of Islam.

Even so, the philosophy and conceptualisation of the celebrated Arab architect, Rasem Badran, offer some clues. He speaks of "the phenomenology of the unfolding". It is simply his way of interpreting the history of a site and reintroducing aspects through contemporary technology and knowledge. Badran claims that his work combines pragmatism **and** idealism. He achieves this purpose through "a continuous dialectic between notions of contextualism on one hand and poetics of a sense of place on the other" (Steele 2005: 41-47).

Rob Krier (1988: 310) writes that "in every cultural era there are two camps, the one of the traditionalists and the other of the avant-gardists. The two are mostly standard bearers of the same age and educational background but with different attachments to cultural heritage; the one cautiously weighing tradition, the other boldly questioning tradition".

Like the Saudis, for example, South Africa seems to be embracing the second approach. Our architects have abandoned their anguished, awkward attempts to evoke a vague and contested anthropological and archaeological past, or recent cataclysmic events such as the end of apartheid. Like Badran our best architects also enter into dialogue with the local context, and the most successful projects respond to both the physical and conceptual world. What these buildings communicate is an exuberant idealism, that is, a reflection of the optimism the architects and this nation wish for the future.

The jury of the 2006 SAIA Projects Awards stated that projects must demonstrate "in one way or another, a responsibility beyond the particular client or context" (*Architecture SA*, March/April 2006: 41). That responsibility can range from sustainability to some metaphysical message. What we want to avoid is buildings that are coded to signal "only for black people". That would be immensely offensive to the majority of our population.

The Africanisation of architecture

Lodges and tourist facilities in particular are sometimes shaped through imitation theming, but it is clear that the 'Africanisation' of architecture, as the recalling of forms of a distant past, is not the only – or even the most desirable – setting to experience Africa. In a natural landscape without an artificial context design is driven by a simple consideration: to merge or to claim.

In an urban context the setting becomes problematic, especially considering the notoriously dysfunctional nature of our fragmented, low-density, sprawling cities. It is noteworthy that many of the architects mentioned above are also urban designers, or that urban designers and town planners were otherwise intimately involved. The mapping, models and site planning clearly show that, in most instances, a large part of the surrounding fabric is also treated as **the project**. It is hugely encouraging that the building-as-isolated-object is being replaced by an emphasis on connectivity and social space.

What then is an appropriate form for the future South African city? African Urbanism was recently described as "[a focus] on the adornment of public urban spaces and linkages in the textures, colours and materials that speak of Africa" (*Leading Architecture and Design*, January/February 2004: 30-32). The article reported on the urban strategy for the development of

Durban Point, an under-utilised 45 hectare site, but one with considerable historic and urbanistic significance. The intention was not to build a theme park or tourist destination – rather to create a mixed-use environment, emphasising the concept of "African Urbanism" as defined above. While the intentions are obviously commendable, the language is somewhat unfortunate, since it is purely about aesthetics.

Figure 22
Durban Point: African Urbanism? (*Leading Architecture*, January/February 2004: 31).

Lindsay Bremner (2004: 12) writes that the model for the redevelopment of Johannesburg is Munich in Germany. This is initially a puzzling statement, until it is realised that South Africans all deserve the same quality environment. München boasts a compact core, quality public spaces, excellent public amenities and good connectivity with its surrounding neighbourhoods. Surely this is a model worth emulating?

More disturbing is this comment from the same article: "The informal trading sector will no longer exist, except in so far as it plays a cultural role in maintaining the African essence of the city". The problem is simply that current Western-based urban models have often presented awkward settings for the informal economic and social activities that are characteristic of most typical contemporary African cities. Architecture *per se* certainly cannot improve the existence of the poor, though this goal was argued in the 1920s by socialist architects in Europe who believed that rebuilding the cities could ensure a fairer society and a new social order. But, rather than obstructing this informal economy and the quest for self-sufficiency, the built environment should at least be able to accommodate it.

This argument is substantiated by *Agenda 21* (CIB 2002: 21). It is claimed that the African city must be different – problems are more severe and the resources fewer. This judgement can be viewed in two ways: either as an admission that Africa's economic dilemma is irreversible, or as an opportunity to manipulate this lack of financial and industrial resources to avoid unsustainable, wasteful development practices. South Africa should obviously embrace the latter.

Of all the current city theories, I find that of Broadbent (1990: 350-351) most convincing and relevant. He propounds that a city should contain three different types of architecture,

which he believes would "offer the widest possible range of urban choices, to more people, than many of our current cities do":

1. Monumental architecture by professionals;
2. Developments within the more general urban texture, mostly also by professionals; and
3. '[F]ree' zones in which self-building is encouraged and even facilitated by 'sites and services' schemes.

The above are already the case in South Africa, except that the 'free' zones and 'sites and services' schemes are usually located too remote from employment opportunities. It is claimed that the African city has not yet been defined (Du Toit & Low 2002: 17). But rather than continuously debating the issue, we should, like the Dutch since the early 20th century, have the courage to experiment with alternative urban models.

There are a number of proven solutions. Apart from compaction, access to jobs and limiting spread, current urban design issues focus mainly on economically and socially appropriate spaces (streets and squares) and typologies, to which must be added reliable sources of energy, appropriate building materials and techniques, innovative climate control measures and recycling systems. These are all targets that must be achieved before urban settings for our architecture can be truly appropriate.

Conclusion

In spite of contrary views held by some social scientists, contemporary cities, their buildings and public spaces are not expected to be expressions of culture in an ethnocentric manner any longer. They should rather be manifestations of contextual characteristics, economic realities, existential necessities, aspirations and expectations, and, in particular, choice. Although a number of directions are evolving in response to these diverse landscapes and taste-cultures, it must be stressed that the buildings discussed not only contribute to the international intellectual milieu, but also consist of valid statements beyond their own contexts. Piet Louw's bath house would have been appreciated in the slums of Calcutta; Phalaborwa Airport would have delighted disembarking tourists at coastal resorts in Mexico and Brazil; Errol Pieters' lodge would have been quite appropriate in Bali.

What is truly remarkable about practice in South Africa is that architects comfortably work across the spectrum discussed above. Revel Fox, Glen Gallagher and Noero Wolff in particular moved comfortably from low-cost housing to corporate buildings for multi-nationals. A certain position is assumed because it responds to the brief, budget, circumstances and the architect's vision, and most certainly not because of any ideological conviction. Piet Louw does not consider himself a barefoot architect because he worked in Llanga, and Andrew Makin does not consider himself elitist because of his exclusive Singita Lebombo Lodge in the Kruger national Park (one of the most expensive resorts in which to stay). They simply created competent and appropriate responses to the situations.

An attempt has been made to show the way to the future of South African architecture. The very first prerequisite is an economic base that would benefit all South Africans, urban and rural. In parallel, our towns and cities must be restructured to eliminate economic and social fragmentation and support economic opportunities. Finally, we do not need a unique architecture – we need an appropriate architecture: Modern, contextualised, complex, nuanced and poetic.

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