

The Pretoria School of Architecture

Its traditions of teaching and heritage

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Background

The Pretoria School of Architecture is in its eighth decade of teaching. It in turn is part of an even longer tradition of teaching through the practice of architecture in the City of Tshwane Pretoria, namely that of the Department of Public Works, and its forbear the *Departement Publieke Werken* (DPW, 1887–1901) of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (ZAR, 1854–1902).

The period of interregnum—that of the Transvaal Colony (1902–1910) in its Milner Kindergarten¹ years and later Union of South Africa (1910–1961)—while bringing ideological change, did not interrupt the continuity of tradition. Hence the likes of personages looming large on South Africa’s architectural legacy, namely Gordon Esselmont Leith (1886–1965) and Gerard Leendert Moerdijk (1890–1958),² as young men cut their professional teeth in these institutions.

Left: The gable of the Old Netherlands Bank on Church Square, designed by WJ de Zwaan (1897), Dutch Neo-Renaissance aesthetics on the African Highveld. (Nicholas Clarke)

Right: A photograph dating to 1955 of a Ndebele homestead on the road to Bronkhorstspuit. (Meiring, 1955: 26)

¹ This is an informal reference to a group of Britons who served in the South African Civil Service under High Commissioner Alfred, Lord Milner (1854–1925), between the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) and the founding of the Union of South Africa (1910–1961), a project they actively favoured and promoted, desiring ultimately an imperial federation of the British Empire itself. Herbert Baker, although older, hosted and regularly met with them as well as endorsing their ambitions.

² For further information of all architect personages referred to in the text, search for the relevant entry on www.artefacts.co.za.

The rapid industrial growth of Johannesburg saw the School of Mining moved there from Kimberley as the diamond rush fizzled. The School of Mining took on the teaching of architecture, and in 1923 it was resolved at an architectural education congress in Durban to professionalise the practice of architecture through a private act of parliament, formalized in 1926. It was decided that examinations in architecture would be conducted through the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) for the teaching centres of Durban and Pretoria, where, at the latter, Wits would assist in teaching as well. In 1943, in the years of the Second World War, the University of Pretoria established independence of its architectural teaching through creating its own degree awards in Architecture.



Establishing traditions

In this short essay, one must of needs simplify perceptions and arguments. It was noted that the School of Architecture at the University of Pretoria reflected pragmatist rather than theoretical concerns.³ This tradition, recently explicated by Jaap-Evert Abrahamse,⁴ derives from the traditions of how those practitioners who came to the ZAR received their training. Because of the overt nature of Calvinist influence, the training of those architects, in particular the patriarch Sytze Wopkes Wierda (1839–1911)² as Chief Architect and Engineer of the ZAR DPW, and his forebear of short duration, disciple and Deputy, Klaas van Rijse (~1860[?]-1941),² came through a school of both craft apprenticeship in carpentry, the traditional way of having architects sensitized to the demands of the profession in the 19th century, and mentorship through being apprenticed to leading practitioners. Later, while serving as practitioners either privately or in civil service, they would extend their knowledge by reading and attending occasional classes. These traditions were brought to the ZAR and fostered the way of teaching in the DPW, where Wierda preferred to train and develop his own personnel. This was a brief period of fifteen years, but was formative. The architects of the late 19th century found themselves in a period of style revivalism, compounded by an eclecticism of stylistic expressions of high cultures encountered in the Colonial project of the Europeans, subsumed by those cultures they encountered in the Colonial project. By the time these Dutch practitioners arrived, those influences had dwindled into a stripped expression for the pragmatic purposes of equipping far-flung rural towns with facilities for the instruments of governance. However, in Pretoria, as centre, the stylistic expressions, although not ebullient, were, when engaging the public, invariably more embellished, such as in the Old Raadsaal and the Palace of Justice. A stone's throw away, where the public was not directly engaged, such as at the Old Government Printing Works, the buildings were purely utilitarian and accommodating of their industrially produced parts.

If one then examines the role of teaching and heritage in this period, one could argue that it set a tone of pragmatism and utilitarianism with adaptations to local circumstances, and encouraged the engagement of local talent for purposes of training and furtherance of their careers.

The hiatus of the Anglo-Boer War led to a change in the composition of the personnel of Public Works Department (PWD). At first it fell to the Royal Military Engineers, but this was soon changed to civilian management after the signing of the peace. Some Dutch-born architects and draughtsmen however returned, invariably those who had fought on the side of the Boers and were exiled to the prisoner-of-war camps abroad. This exposure to exotic cultures and their influence in terms of architectural expression in Pretoria has never been examined and is a rich area for investigation, even if only as vehicle for receptivity to the foreign or 'other'.

At the time of Union, Herbert Baker (later Sir) (1862–1946)² loomed large on the horizon. His engagement as designer for the Main Station in Pretoria and the Union Buildings thereafter, and the peculiar contractual arrangement of he and his staff providing drawings but assisted through the offices of the PWD, led to a systemic cross-pollination between his office and that of the PWD. Cape Dutch Revival became an almost institutional and official style, particularly for public buildings in the Union, and particularly as Geoffrey Eastcott Pearse (1885–1968),² first Chair of Architecture of the Wits School, had led a team of students to document the Cape Dutch buildings of the Cape. This in turn formed an almost Beaux Arts understanding of the Cape vernacular traditions, emanating in his classic, signature and seminal publication *Eighteenth Century Architecture in South Africa* (1933). The fact that one finds well-worn and pencil-marked editions in the trade reflects upon their engaged use by old practitioners. Two members of this

3 Howie, 1965: 45.

4 Abrahamse, 2014: 6–23.

student team were Norman Eaton (1902–1966)³ and William Gordon McIntosh (1904–1983),² both to become influential through their connections as teachers at the Pretoria School of Architecture. One could argue that they became the vehicles for the persistence of these traditions in Pretoria, although not stylistically overt, covert in application and expression.

The aspect of learning through employment has not been much researched, but on reflecting as to which practitioners engaged students and hence might have been locally influential, of the older generation Gerard Moerdijk must be mentioned and the engagement in his office of the students Carel (Gus) Gerneke (1931–), Johan Karel (Jan) van Wijk (1926–2005),² John Voorendijk (19??–) and Wilhelm Olaf (Willie) Meyer (1935–2006)² cannot be ignored. Then there are the church architects Geers and Geers—a partnership of the father and son Leendert Marinus Geers (1877–1957)² and Geurt Marinus Geers (1909–1945)² until the latter's untimely death by drowning—and their engagement of Hendrik Vermooten (1921–2013),² also that of Pieter Simon Dijkstra (1884–1968)² and Johan de Ridder (1927–2013);² all lineages that contributed to the traditions of Dutch influence in the city. This is particularly visible in architectural expression of the city's Afrikaner community churches. Dutch Modernism and its brick-based styling gained a foothold through these influences, and because of the pervasive traditions of brick through the local brick-making enterprise of John Johnston Kirkness (1857–1937) at the Fountains Circle gateway to Pretoria, the legacy of Wilhelmiens styling, and persistence of brick as a material of choice, Dutch influence was perpetuated into the era of the Modern.

While Pretoria was to shift its attentions to Brazil, particularly since the year of founding its School of Architecture in 1943 coincided with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)'s 'Brazil Builds' exhibition and book of the same name,⁵ covert influences persisted through the works of both Eaton and Att Meiring's

independent researches of the local Ndebele.⁶ While their decorative practices have almost come to epitomize South African indigeneity, one must not lose sight of the fact that, in terms of the history of the discipline of architecture, it is as recent as, and probably responsive to, Boer settlement. Its decorative motifs certainly seem to illustrate Boer architectural devices of Cape Dutch origin, and some others, although not researched and here posited speculatively, are certainly Wilhelmiens. Their practices formed some of the first areas of research and documentation under the first Head of School, Adriaan Louw Meiring (1904–1979, also called Att or 'Blik'),² and, even into the recent past under Bakker and Van Vuuren, the intrigue and need has endured, due to the marginalization of the representative families.

The Apartheid years of isolation also impacted on the Pretoria School of Architecture, although it did not necessarily dampen enthusiasm for researching regional heritage—Pilgrim's Rest,⁷ Graaff-Reinet,⁸ Cullinan, New Bethesda, the Eastern Cape, and the Pretoria suburb of Hatfield with Project PO⁹ have all been focuses of interest and engagement. In the seventies the Apartheid regime saw opportunity to appropriate Church Square as centre of power, and looked to a grandiose scheme of creating a gateway to the west through placing two tower blocks for the ministries of the Interior and Post and Telecommunications as pylons flanking Church Street on the west side of Square. This created a 'broedertwis', or internal strife, by pitting the conservative voices for the preservation of the legacy of Kruger's Pretoria against the mandarins of power seeking to assert authority through a contemporary architectural expression in the heart of the Administrative Capital. Much internecine blood-letting ensued and the students and some staff of the School of Architecture, including the young Karel Bakker as part of the student body, nailed their flag to the conservation cause. All the buildings located on the south-west front of the square dated from the period of

5 Goodwin, 1943.

6 Meiring, 1955: 26–35.

7 [Argitektuurstudente], 1968.

8 Van Riet & Minnaar, 1977.

9 See report lodged in the archive of the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria. Catalogue number: 00210.

the ZAR, as did some of the smaller edifices on the north-west front. Not only did those agitating for conservation, through mobilizing public support and creating pressure groups within the palace of the ruling Nationalist Party, win the day but, through an act of parliament directed specifically at Church Square and its preservation, they gained specific legislation in support of their cause, a circumstance which persists up until this day, although now recommended by the Law Commission as obsolete and due for scrapping.¹⁰



Sybrand? Nee Skylab! Cartoon by Grin Scott (?) dating to 1979. The NASA Skylab Space Station was crashing to earth at the same time that the protest against the Transvaal Provincial Government's plans to demolish the west façade of Church Square reached fever pitch. That protesters directed their anger towards the then serving administrator of the Transvaal, Sybrand van Niekerk, explains the pun. (Collection Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria)

Schalk le Roux (1945–), who joined the staff of the Pretoria School in the late 1970s and became lecturer of history and design, introduced ongoing student documentation of central sectors of Pretoria, leading to various documentations and publications over the years of his teaching.¹¹ Students under his tutelage also documented the old ZAR towns of Heidelberg,¹² Ermelo¹³ and the mission settlement of Botshabelo.¹⁴ But this was all done in comparative institutional and departmental isolation. Gus Gerneke, a perennial presence as teacher, had in this time also gone to the Lowland country of Belgium to pursue studies in conservation.¹⁵

Since the establishment of full democracy in 1994, there has been a rapprochement and we are again able to engage our Dutch counterparts in the sharing of our legacy and its engagement in our teaching. We are in a period of realizing the depth and novelty of this legacy and opportunity for its engagement and discovery in our programme of teaching, particularly at post-graduate level. There has been and still is opportunity for student exchange and lecturer engagement. While we explore our Dutch connections, this is not with a view to any cultural hegemony, but rather to deepen our understandings of our differences, hybridity, cultural commonalities and diversities.

Our common objective is to preserve memory and dignify our City of Tshwane, particularly at its centre, by giving longevity to its past architectural enterprises as a functional legacy for its future. The Department of Architecture remains committed to contribute to this objective through the Shared Heritage Programme and other means.

¹⁰ See Clarke, 2014 and Clarke 2015.

¹¹ Le Roux & Botes, 1990; Le Roux & Botes, 1992; Le Roux & Botes, 1993.

¹² Le Roux, 1988.

¹³ Erasmus, 2000.

¹⁴ Le Roux, 1991.

¹⁵ Gerneke, 1980.



Architecture students protesting the planned redevelopment of the Church Square west façade. Here, Karel Bakker, later a well known Pretorian architect and conservationist, with fellow student Recht Hiemstra, on Church Square in 1975. (*Pretoriana* 1975. No 72, 164)

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