

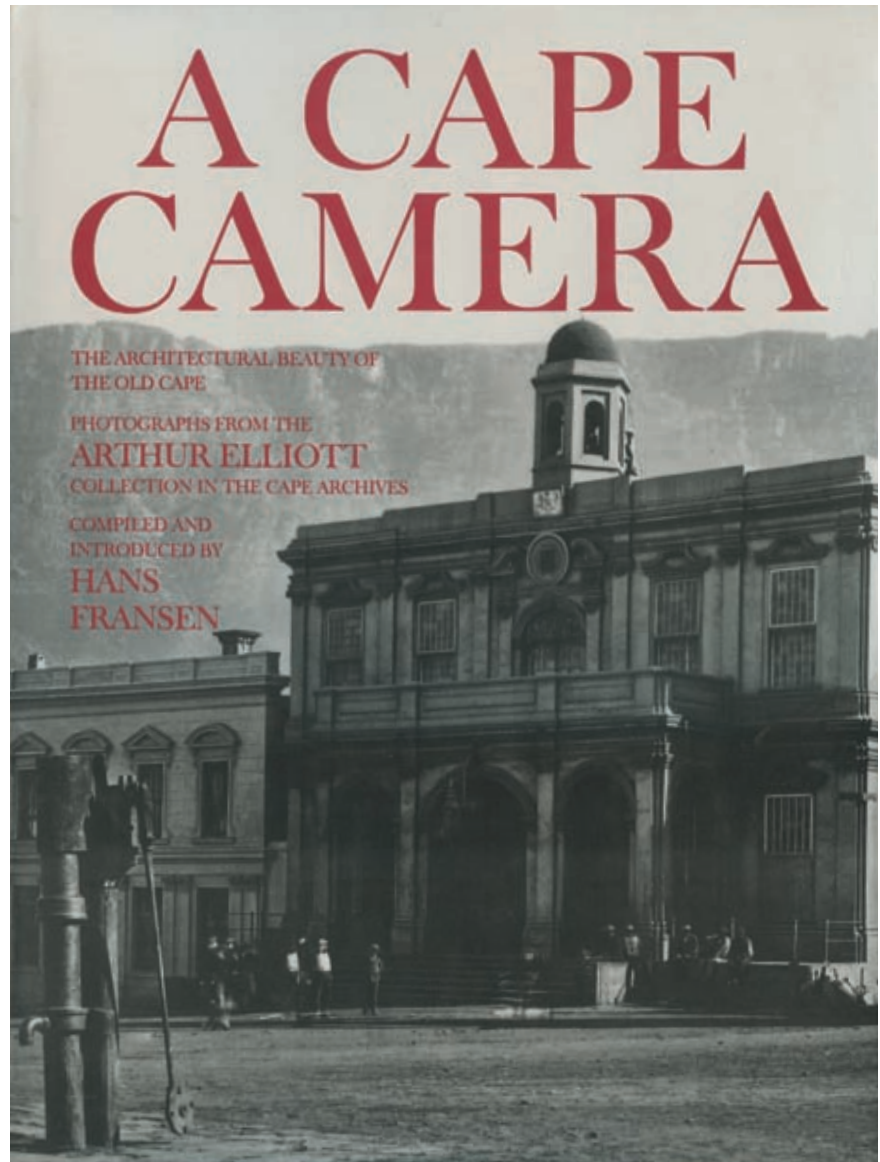
ARCHITECTS WITHOUT ARCHITECTURE – ARCHITECTS AND THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY

BY: **ROGER C FISHER**

I WAS RECENTLY ASKED to write a postlude of Carla Crafford's (née Hartman) forthcoming limited edition retrospective monograph. That got me thinking about the role of photography in architecture.

It may come as a surprise to discover that architects were among the early photography entrepreneurs in South Africa. Carl Otto Hager (1813–1898), the German émigré recognised by Radford as the architect who introduced the Neo-Gothic style for church buildings into South Africa, switched to being a 'daguerrotypist' for a while. In 1858 he opened a photographic studio in Cape Town, specialising in daguerrotype portraiture, one of its earliest exponents in the Cape. He returned, however, to Stellenbosch in about 1860, where by 1861 he had 'portrait rooms'. He retained his interest in photographic portraiture throughout his career. The extant portrait photograph we have of him may well be his own work of that time and certainly one of the earliest examples of a photographed SA architect.

The precursor to the modern camera is the camera obscura, an optical device that projects an image of its surroundings onto a screen. Henry Carter Galpin (1820–1886), a near contemporary of Hager, while not recorded as a photographer (although it would not be a surprise if he was), is remembered for his various optic devices incorporated into his home in Grahamstown, amongst these a wall-placed oculus which helped circumscribe the analemma of the annual transit of the earth around the sun on the floor of the room, and a camera obscura located in a roof-top tower. Galpin arrived in South Africa in 1848. He was born in Charmouth, Dorset and trained in England as an architect, civil engineer and a clockmaker. He won the competition to design the hothouse in the Cape Town Gardens. By 1849 he was living in Grahamstown, having become a surveyor, retiring



The cover of *A Cape Camera*

prematurely for reasons of health, and working instead as a clockmaker. He was instrumental in identifying for science the first diamond as being such (I am respectful of the fact that the San also knew of them) in South Africa. His house in Grahamstown has become a landmark, including as it did, the observatory and the camera

obscura which has been restored, is still functional and works as part of a public museum.

We may look to our sister (or stepchild) profession – that of civil engineering – to discover how a rapidly developing technology gave rise to a new form of documentation. In a well-researched and recently published monograph



Bridging the Eastern Cape, Dennis Walters, himself a civil engineer, relates how Joseph Newey (1846–1907), when in 1881 appointed as chief inspector of the Department of Public Works of the Cape Colony, was furnished with photographs of the pre-assembled prefabricated steel Kei Bridge before delivery and shipment by the London works of Westwood Baillie & Co prior to dispatchment. This heralded a new era in project monitoring, one still with us today – iPad apps make it possible to photograph, mark up and post instructions for immediate turnaround of documentation and issued within hours!

Although not an architect, the appreciation the profession has for the work of Arthur Elliott (1870–1938) gives him a deserved place here. He was from New York, an orphan from the age of 12, although he earned his living in Scotland before coming to South Africa, aged nearly 20. He tried various odd jobs in Johannesburg, including that of scene painter and theatre production manager. He brought the first phonograph to the Transvaal and played it to President Kruger. He, having arrived in Cape Town as an Anglo-Boer War refugee in 1900, took to his life-long profession, photography. Initially he made money taking portrait photographs of Boer internees at Green Point being readied for exile through the Cape Town Harbour, to send to their families as mementos. It is said that it was the doughty Alys Fane Trotter (née



Keatinge, 1863–1961) who suggested that he document in photographs what she was doing on her bicycle with pencil – the rapidly deteriorating rural Cape Dutch houses of the peninsula. This fired his intense love of South African history and its Cape Dutch architecture, expressed in his 10 000 photographs, which form an unrivalled pictorial record of the early 20th Century at the Cape. During his lifetime, only a portfolio of his photographs for the use of schools was published, but 1969 saw the publication of 162 of his best pictures of farmsteads and historic buildings, with text by Hans Fransen. Shortly before Elliott's death, he offered his collection to the government for £5 000, but this was turned down. Eventually in 1946, the main Elliott collection, acquired by the Historical Monuments Commission six years before by means of contributions totalling a mere £2 525, was presented to the Cape Archives by the government, where it now resides.

For the sake of space, I have chosen the following architects purely out of personal preference. Robert Cole Bowen was a Leica cameraman. He published rarely in the local architectural magazines since he demanded full control of language, illustrations and layout! His published oeuvre is thus limited. He also produced a tome, *15 Essays in Half-Tone*. It was a classic of its time and remains so. In the same league is Gawie Fagan; his black-and-white photographs for his book *Brakdak* are also timeless memorials to a rural past.

He tells me that then he used a 6x9 Linhof to photograph these records.

Today in the digital era, we have Leon Krige producing high-resolution frozen records of urban skylines, meticulous in detail, like opening the advent boxes of a Christmas calender.

If I may return to the postlude I composed for Carla Crafford – although specific, I have edited it into a general observation on the art of photography since I hold that its art reveals some universal truths:

As humans we share our senses, through vision our visions and envisioning. Seeing is a democratic act. Yet we each have our individual way of seeing, which varies in acuity and ability. As recompense, we have the artist see for us. The artist is our tour guide, taking us, through our eyes, to worlds familiar made strange, and unfamiliar known, all etched to memory. Yet, by adding a corrective lens, our introductions are as they meet them. We are privileged, through the science of vision, to read the geochronology of site and archaeology of those artefacts chosen as subject. Each time we come to the end of our travels with a photographer as artist, we have been introduced to all that they have met. We are taken on journeys into worlds recovered and uncovered. All subjects photographed, if chaotic, are subjected to an equality by being ordered, through the lens, into a cohesive and democratic realm. And we are guided in envisioning the spaces, places and faces of things discovered. We are inspired to retain our sense of awe as tourists through life.

A mysterious and glorious art indeed!

Roger C Fisher is emeritus professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria.

- 1 The photograph of Hager
- 2 15 Essays in half tone by Cole Bowen
- 3 Brakdak by Gawie Fagan