THE TRAGEDY of CAPE TOWN: Missed Opportunities

According to the writer of this article, the Doges' Palace in Venice (shown on the left) was one of the finest buildings in the whole world, would not be allowed under "ours absurd building regulations!"

By GERARD MOERDIJK
The South African Architect

In the course of a recent lecture in the Transvaal, Mr. Moerdijk made some criticisms of the architectural lay-out of Cape Town, and now, at the request of The Week-End Argus, he has amplified his statement in the form of an article.

Sir Francis Drake said: "This cape is a most stately thing and the fairest cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth."

Poor Sir Francis! How deeply disappointed he would be if he could return to-day and see how man has treated this fair cape. On this site, unparalleled on the Riviera—even Naples herself cannot boast so grand a setting—instead of an inspiring city raising its towers within the shelter of the mountain, Sir Francis would see a jumble of buildings, a city built without vision.

Imagine the scene that might have greeted the eye of the visitor as he approached Table Bay. The great amphitheatre laid out in the form of half a spider’s web, its centre somewhere near the bottom of the present Adlerstreet, with radiating avenues and concentric streets, roughly following the contour of the mountain and laid out in terraces, each higher terrace overlapping the one beneath, every house with a glimpse of the bay and the land beyond. Somewhat different, however, is the scene that greets him now.

When a butcher wants to cut up a carcass he sets about it according to some definite plan, else he would have more waste than profitable joints. How much more so should not this be the case with the building of a city, where the mistakes of to-day cannot be stuffed into oblivion, but remain to become the eyecore of to-morrow. Cape Town creates the impression of having been built bit by bit, a new piece being added when the old was full, with no thought of unity or appearance.

Still, without very drastic alterations, we could even now create arced streets like those of the Italian town of Bologna, by which means we could beautify our cities without obstructing any necessary irrigating traffic, and, for such streets, a more uniformity without necessarily creating monotony. Underground tramways starting in Adlerstreet and emerging somewhere near Groote Schuur would eliminate much unnecessary traffic along the mountain. A similar underground service should connect up the other suburban districts, with the centre of the city. This would do away with all the noise and inconvenience of electric traffic in the busy streets.

The bottom of Adlerstreet is a disgrace to any town. One really cannot find excuses for some of its abominations. How could a crime against good taste like the War Memorial be allowed in a city which possesses two of the finest monuments in the world, namely the Van Riebeeck Statue and the Rhodes Memorial at Groote Schuur? The South African town of Bologna, by which means we could beautify our cities without obstructing any necessary irrigating traffic, and, for such streets, a more uniformity without necessarily creating monotony. Underground tramways starting in Adlerstreet and emerging somewhere near Groote Schuur would eliminate much unnecessary traffic along the mountain. A similar underground service should connect up the other suburban districts, with the centre of the city. This would do away with all the noise and inconvenience of electric traffic in the busy streets.

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SOUTH AFRICANS have had a wonderful opportunity of building a city famous for its beauty the world over, and they have failed lamentably. This dream city is lost forever; only a dictator could do what is required to be done now, a dictator with no regard for personal property or vested interests. And yet, the possibility of improvement still exists. One realises immediately, of course, that no definite plan can be brought forward until a thorough civic survey has been made of the whole city site. Yet even so, a few suggestions crop up at once of how the most blatant monstrosities could be remedied.

The setting back of the building line above the first floor level, forced upon us by an altogether wrong and antiquated building law, which demands for a climate quite different from ours, is responsible for the ramshackle appearance of South African towns. The Doges' Palace in Venice, one of the finest buildings in the whole world, would not be allowed under our absurd building regulations.