

# BEYOND CONTINUITY AND CONTRAST: *PART 1* NEW ARCHITECTURE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Wilkinson Architects' additions to St. Mary's DSG, Pretoria provide insight into how an architect can design within historical contexts

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This article describes how an architect can operate when designing in historical contexts. It will also sketch the biographical influences and design philosophy of Wilkinson Architects to not only increase the limited record of the practice of South African architects, but also elucidate design approaches.

## KEY WORD

Historical context, conservation, preservation, design practice.

## INTRODUCTION

St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls (DSG), in Hillcrest Pretoria, is a primary and high school founded in 1879 by the then bishop of Pretoria, Henry Brougham Bousfield (1832–1902). Two new distinctly different additions designed by Chris Wilkinson of Wilkinson Architects have been added to DSG's campus. You will not notice the new buildings at first glance and although several of the architect's previous projects have been published<sup>1</sup>, you will struggle to find a picture of him! There are none on his practice website<sup>2</sup> and after trolling the internet, I could only find one on LinkedIn! This exemplifies Wilkinson's self-effacing nature, which belies a deeply philosophical, yet contextually nuanced, and pragmatically focused view of what architecture should be. In one-on-one discussion, his quiet demeanour also disguises a fiercely critical attitude to the forging of our built environment, represented, in the main, by his "background" buildings. This considered approach to working in historic contexts provides much food for thought for heritage practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This article describes how an architect can possibly operate when designing in historical contexts. The perceived limitations of current design attitudes that seem to focus on formal approaches, which are either a copy of or contrast to existing historical contexts, are also to be highlighted. The article describes a more holistic approach that involves seven design stages, starting with recognition and ending with architectural expression. Additions at DSG are used as case studies to explain how the various

This article is in two parts. Part 1 is a discussion of architectural heritage and introduces Chris Wilkinson of Wilkinson Architects. Part 2 deals with Wilkinson's work in an historical context and his architectural strategy for the additions to St Mary's DSG.

## ABSTRACT

About two years ago, two new and distinctly different, but sensitively considered additions were designed by Chris Wilkinson of Wilkinson Architects for St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls (DSG) in Hillcrest Pretoria. Wilkinson's considered approach to working in historic contexts provides much food for thought for architectural heritage practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. The new Kopano Centre alongside its Art and Crafts inspired neighbour. (Photo Franz Rabe).



stages have been applied. This article follows in the same vein as previously published articles on the architecture of Thomashoff+Partners, Marguerite Pienaar and earthworld architects, by sketching the biographical influences and design philosophy of Wilkinson Architects to not only increase the limited record of the practice of South African architects, but also elucidate design approaches.

#### R T A P R A C T C

Architects need to make critical decisions about design approaches in historical environments to limit the perception that historical contexts are but static resources. In South Africa, the role of the architect working in historical contexts has, since the advent of the NHRA of 1999<sup>3</sup> and its 2000 agency in South Africa, highlighted the importance of determining a range of values that frame the significance of important artefacts. Terms like cultural landscape have begun to sensitise architects about the significance of tangible and intangible heritage and the value of place, culture and form and their interrelationships.

To advance a critical approach to working in historical contexts, architects need to undertake several design stages (Barker, 2021). Firstly, they should be able to *recognise* that a historical context with significance is present. Secondly, they need to *collect* enough relevant information, and then through a third process, *analyse* the context by unpacking values and determining significances. Here heritage practitioners fulfil a vital role.

Fourthly, the architect needs to develop an architectural-historical *attitude* to the particular context under consideration. This will be influenced by education, theoretical knowledge, and legislative restrictions. Theoretical-historical positions and the spirit and content of heritage charters provide the main stimuli for the development of relevant *attitudes*. MacGilvary, (1988:3) recognises that today there are three main alternatives in dealing with a historic resource, suggesting that it can either be kept, changed or destroyed. Pre-enlightenment *attitudes* for intervening in historical contexts were essentially traditive. The “model” was passed down and refined while maintenance procedures closely followed the original intentions. Later, Vitruvius’ first-

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century BC manual *De Architectura*, cited regulations for Rome, which guaranteed that new buildings were designed in harmony with the existing built context and good building practice and maintenance were adhered to (Jokilehto, 1999:2). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a dialectic formed between restoration and anti-restoration (conservation) movements led by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), and John Ruskin (1819–1900) and his protégé William Morris (1834–1896) respectively. Later, the Italian architect, Camillo Boito (1836–1914), advocated philological restoration – a theory directly influenced by the ideas of Ruskin and Morris. It avoided both the conservativeness of the restorers and the radicalism of those who preferred to see new buildings by emphasising conservation over restoration (Hernandez Martinez 2008:249).

Heritage charters provide limited formal guidance for working in historical contexts as they focus on principles and broad intentions. The International Congress of Architecture, held in Madrid in 1904, highlighted philological *attitudes* to be taken to existing monuments by defining them as either living (those that continue to serve their purpose) or dead (those belonging to a past civilization or those that no longer served their original function). Living monuments were to be restored while dead monuments should be preserved, but only insofar as they are prevented from falling into ruin (Erder, 1986:209). The 1931 Athens Charter, a revision of Boito’s principles (Stubbs and Markis, 2011:16), “discouraged stylistic restorations in support of conservation processes that respected different changes made to buildings over time” (Heroldt, 2014:4; Gerneke, 1983:42). The 1964 Venice Charter broadened the understanding of a historical context to include setting and event. The 1972 UNESCO >

2. The Arts and Crafts inspired 1926–1928 main school buildings at DSG designed by Rees Poole.



Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention described, for the first time, the meaning of “cultural landscapes”, which broadened the categorisation of historical significance to include all landscapes intentionally designed by man.

The 1981 Burra Charter (and its 1999 revision) were important milestones for the development of *attitudes* to working in historical contexts. The philosophy of “do as much as necessary to care for the place and to make it useable, but otherwise change it as little as possible so that its cultural significance is retained” (Burra Charter, 1999:1) fostered a vigilant approach to heritage practice while its definitions of preservation, adaptation, restoration and reconstruction provided general *attitudes* for dealing with extant fabric.

*Attitudes* to historical contexts are framed by the dialectics of restoration and conservation and informed by a process of ever-increasing change. The conservative pole favours reconstruction where the lost or severely damaged artefact is rebuilt in its original form with materials to match as far as possible. Protection means retarding any decay, no matter the condition, so that the artefact is, effectively, “cotton-wooled” to prevent any further damage or alterations. Remodelling encompasses change. It is a “process of providing a balance between the past and the future ... the past takes on a greater significance because it, itself, is the material to be altered and reshaped. The past provides the already written, the marked “canvas” on which each successive remodelling will find its place. Thus,

the past becomes a package of built-up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed or suppressed (refused)” (Machado, 1994:19). A Palimpsestic *attitude* reinforces the theories of Camilo Boito who argued for an architecture in historical contexts that is reflective of its

time and which expresses a layering of additions so that each is specifically recognisable. Adaptive Reuse provides new purpose for buildings and places in historical contexts. New life is breathed into existing artefacts so that their value and significance is contemporarised and extended. Adaptive Reuse principles also reinforce the spirit of the 1964 Venice Charter, which calls for conservation, by providing a merit-worthy building with a new “socially useful purpose”

Replacement (new build) favours completely new construction to replace a missing artefact, however, the result is not achieved through a process of inauthentic reconstruction but rather through a process of authentic translation. The final and most radical *attitude* is Relocation that forms part of the context of reconstruction. Petzet (2004:21) notes that this *attitude* can only be applied as a last resort if the artefact cannot be preserved in its original context.

The fifth design stage involves the development of design *approaches*. “The action or act of ‘*approach*’<sup>4</sup> implies an awareness of the relation between the original, historical body of the building and its new complementary and/or defining elements, that tries to establish a dialogue based on the dialectical confrontation between independent elements. The intention is to define a relation that is established in terms of nearness and juxtaposition” (Borsotti, 2014:4). Rapoport (2006:182) and Ozkan (2007:104) argue that design *approaches* [can] vary from the replicative to the interpretative. The former tends towards a scenographic *approach*, while the latter transforms principles to suit contemporary practice. However, the limitations of scenography freeze architecture in time, diminishing its validity, while a process of interpretation can abstract the architecture to such an extent that historic continuity is lost. Defamiliarisation has been used as a general *approach* to deal with these binaries, the term being first coined by the Russian critic Victor Schloesky for whom the purpose of art [was] to force the viewers to take notice by presenting

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everyday objects in an unfamiliar way to heighten the perception of the familiar.

To alleviate the self-evident tendency of either creating copies or contrasts in historical contexts, a relational scale is suggested. It is framed by the *approaches* of continuity to contrast and aligns with the principles of defamiliarisation. At the conservative end, an *approach* of mirroring is posited. Collage follows with prototyping thereafter. At the more radical end of the scale, transformation and opposition are located.

In the sixth design stage, architectural *strategies* need to be used to give impetus to the selected *approaches*. These are detail decisions about formal reactions to and interactions with existing built fabric. It is the relationship between new and extant fabric that is under consideration. Several authors have suggested possible architectural *strategies*. These are constructed through a relational scale that sets the new intervention against its existing context. For example, Robert's (1989) *strategies* are "the building within, the building over, the building around, the building alongside, recycling materials and vestiges", while authors in the *Idea Journal* (2006:3) cite "intervention, insertion and installation" as design possibilities. Bollack (2013) classifies *strategies* by type, as "insertions, parasites, wraps, juxtapositions, and weavings". Borsotti and Campanella (2015:4) focus on *strategies* associated specifically with remodelling, naming them as "approach, addition, insertion and superimposition".

The seventh, and final, design stage focuses on the *expression* of *strategies* using form, space, materials, technologies and light. This is the mettle of the architect and requires strict aesthetic control to foster architectural intentions guided by the preceding six design stages. The architect is required to create appropriate form and space by firstly, adopting an appropriate structural system, which, at its extents, can be visible or hidden. Then building technologies (which are composed of materials combined in various ways) must be selected to give impetus to form that reacts to the structural expression and spatial meaning. Thereafter, detail expression plays a large role in highlighting design intentions to give effect to principles such as the binaries of separation and connection.

Wilkinson Architects have, subconsciously, adopted many of these design stages in their work at DSG campus. It can be argued that the antecedents of Wilkinson's critical, but sensitive, design approach are founded in a contextual upbringing and education.

## T A R C T C T

Chris Wilkinson (1966–) was born and raised in Upington in the Northern Cape. His first vivid recollection of architecture was a stone-walled, flat-roofed house that belonged to an architect friend of his parents, Floors Strydom. Wilkinson recalls that he noticed the Strydom family had a different outlook on life and that, in hindsight, the house was probably regionally modernist with its ubiquitous



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sunken lounge pit. "This grabbed my attention early on and I decided at about age five that I wanted to be an architect. I even have a photo where I dressed up as one with khaki hat and tape measure, measuring up our garden walls!" (Wilkinson, 2019a).

Wilkinson was clearly a natural-born designer. He recalls that "when asked to draw the number 1 on our first day at school, I drew a three-dimensional 'one' (as on Monopoly bills), but was quickly 'corrected' by the teacher that it must just be a straight vertical line. I will never forget that! I have been inclined to three-dimensional exploration early on (from around age six) and used to build endless models with white cardboard offcuts from my dad's framing business. At age ten, I had my own treehouse with fireplace, bicycle parking and a telephone line (old intercom from my dad's business) to the kitchen to order Oros and Marie biscuits!" (Wilkinson, 2019a).

But the drudgery of secondary school education brought itself to bear on the future architect. "Although academically strong in primary school, I started struggling in high school, especially with conventional subjects like accounting. My new-found love of taking motorcycles apart and [putting them] back together as well as building balsa model aeroplanes was a further distraction. I loved the sketching part of biology and in Standard Nine<sup>5</sup>, I switched from accounting to metalwork and really excelled in technical drawings and the making of three-dimensional items" (Wilkinson, 2019a). >

3. Rees Poole's vision for the DSG main school buildings. The two lower, splayed wings were never constructed (Addison, 1979:2). 4. A scale of architectural attitudes (Author 2019). 5. A scale of architectural approaches (Author, 2008–2019, developed from Japha, D. 1986).

Wilkinson studied architecture at the University of the Free State. He notes that “Prof Paul Kotze<sup>6</sup> had a major influence in my third year, guiding me in the right direction and believing in my abilities” (Wilkinson, 2019a). Kotze also planted the seeds of the value of urban design, which increased Wilkinson’s fascination with the making of place rather than architecture as object. Here he cites the influences of Roelof Uytenbogaardt (1933–1998) as seminal in his architectural development. Other late Modern Movement architects such as the Portuguese-born Alvaro Siza (1933–) and Eduardo Souto de Moura (1952–) and contextually focused architects such as Australian Glen Murcutt (1936–), reinforced the contextual bias of his tertiary education. In 1991, he completed his architecture degree and won one of the first National Corobrik Architecture Student Awards (Wilkinson, 2019a).

Between 1991 and 1998, Wilkinson worked for several architectural practices, including Jan Ras Architect’s Group in Bloemfontein and Broodryk Bessenger in the Cape. It was his sojourn in the southern part of South Africa that physically exposed Wilkinson to the contextual architecture of Gawie Fagan and the urban design and architecture of Roelof Uytenbogaardt. In 1998, he established, with Henri Comrie (1965–)<sup>7</sup>, Comrie + Wilkinson Architects. Wilkinson notes that Comrie had a very positive influence on his design career, especially in terms of the value of working with platonic form such as that used by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) and Alvaro Siza (Wilkinson, 2019a). In 2010, he established his firm, Wilkinson Architects, which operates from Muckleneuk, Pretoria.

Wilkinson’s design skills have been recognised through four South African Institute for Architecture national Awards of Merit for various projects between 2000 and 2016<sup>8</sup>. Notable achievements are the Architecture SA Project Award for design of the Sarah Bartmann Centre of Remembrance in Hankey in the Eastern Cape after Wilkinson won the international competition in 2009. In 2014, against four other practices, he won (with Mashilo Lambrechts Architects and GXY) the national Sol Plaatje University Architectural competition, to design phase 1 of a new university in Kimberley in the Northern Cape. Since 2014, he has been involved with the design of various educational facilities and a wide variety of other projects.

Wilkinson’s architectural philosophy, founded in making and context, has evolved into a holistic response. “My outlook now is to always be able to apply the phrase ‘responsive architecture’ to anything we do. The phrase is all encapsulating and if you apply its principles I believe the building will always



be successful” (Wilkinson, 2019a). “As architects we have a sensible approach in which responsive design plays a key element, incorporated with creativity, practicality as well as budget constraints. Therefore, we consider the client’s brief as utmost importance, but in addition to the execution of the brief, we add value in terms of the response to contextual and climatic influences as well as finding ways to be most creative within budgetary constraints. It is of key importance that all designs comply with sustainability requirements to establish long-term cost-savings.”

More importantly, Wilkinson’s buildings can be described as “fitting” their context, seldom shouting their intentions or existence, but rather grounding themselves in place to forge a new background for appropriate activities and events. At DSG, Wilkinson has creatively engaged with the historical context by inserting an architecture that is a transformation of existing formal typologies. ■

## T S

<sup>1</sup> See list at the end of this article.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wilkinsonarchitects.co.za>.

<sup>3</sup> Buildings of significance are protected by Section 38 of the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999, which is legally binding through its stipulation that a building over 60 years requires protection.

<sup>4</sup> My italics.

<sup>5</sup> Grade 11 today.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Paul Kotze taught at the University of the Free State and retired from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2016. He studied Urban Design under Roelof Uytenbogaardt and has written extensively on South African architecture.

<sup>7</sup> <http://artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/archframes.php?archid=2215> [accessed 11 May 2019].

See Awards list.

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6. Creative pavilion “floating” edge also functions as seating (Chris Wilkinson).

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  2. 2002 – National Dulux Colour Award for Van Ryn Place of Safety, Benoni (with Vikash Maharaj Rajoo).
  3. 2005 – Gauteng Institute for Arch Vaal University of Technology (with Morné Pienaar).
  4. 2006 – National South African Institute of Architects Award of Merit for The Chapel of Light, Vaal University of Technology (with Morné Pienaar)
  5. 2007 – Finalist in Daimler Chrysler Award for Design Architects under the age of 40.
  6. 2007 – Pretoria Institute for Architecture Award of Merit for House Rosa, Pretoria.
  7. 2008 – National South African Institute of Architects Award of Merit for House Rosa, Pretoria.
  8. 2009 – Architecture SA Project Award for design of Dune House, Kai, Port Nolloth.
  9. 2009 – Winning Architect of the Sarah Bartmann Centre of Remembrance Design Competition, Eastern Cape.
  10. 2011 – Architecture SA Project Award for Sarah Bartmann Centre of Remembrance.
  11. 2012 – National South African Institute of Architects Award of Merit KaiKai, Port Nolloth.
  12. 2012 – SA Architect Project Award for Remembrance Design Competition, Eastern Cape.
  13. 2018 – South African Institute of Architects Award of Merit 2018 for Sol Plaatje University Building CX 003.
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  2. *House & Leisure* Aug 2001 – New Garden Pavilion, Pretoria.
  3. *Architecture SA* Nov/Dec 2002 – Van Ryn Place of Safety, Benoni.
  4. *Leading Architecture & Design* Jul/Aug 2002 – Focus on Melrose Arch
  5. *SA Architect* Jan/Feb 2002 – An Architecture of Discovery.
  6. *Leading Architecture & Design* Mar/Apr 2003 – Van Ryn Place of Safety, Benoni.
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  10. *Garden & Home* 2005 – Living in a Shed.
  11. *Digest for South African Architecture* 2004/2005 – New Chapel, Vaal University of Technology, Vanderbijlpark.
  12. *World Architecture* 176 – Chapel of Light, Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng, South Africa.
  13. *UME19* – Chapel of Light, Vaal University of Technology, Vanderbijlpark.
  14. *Contemporary Architecture in a Landscape of Transition* – Chapel of Light, Vaal University of Technology, Vanderbijlpark.
  15. *Architecture SA* Nov/Dec 2009 – Project Award for Dune House, KaiKai Residential Estate, Port Nolloth.
  16. *VISI* 46 Holiday issue 2009 – House du Toit, KaiKai Residential Estate, Port Nolloth.
  17. *Mail & Guardian* 23 Dec 2009 – House Rosa and the Chapel of Light in an article by Hugh Fraser on South African architectural expression.
  18. *Earthworks* June 2016 – Sol Plaatje University.