

Rural Architecture

Melinda Silverman

Of all the routes leading north out of Johannesburg, the Old Pretoria Road used to be one of the most graceful. The eucalyptus trees along the route were just dense enough to provide shade without obstructing the views out into the *veld* (grassland). Less than 15 years ago, the prettiest of these views was a cluster of brightly painted Ndebele homesteads just a few minutes' drive from the city.

Today the Old Pretoria Road is a busy commercial strip running through Midrand, South Africa's fastest-growing "edge city." The eucalyptus trees have been cut down, and the Ndebele settlements have disappeared, replaced by cinemas, shopping centers, and office parks that accommodate an array of multinational, high-tech industries.

This is known as progress — just one of the pressures to which South Africa's indigenous architecture is continually subject. Yet, miraculously, people continue to build in more or less traditional ways — they just do it further and further from urban areas, or they manage to carve out places in big cities where they can practice traditional customs and blur the divide between urban and rural.

Viewed through the eyes of White authorities, South Africa's landscape has always had a cartoon-like clarity: White, urban centers surrounded by Black, rural hinterland. Square buildings against round ones; concrete against mud; the supposedly civilized against the supposedly naive, natural, and native. This anthropological antithesis formed a rationale for apartheid — the system



An example of traditional architecture by the Basotho people in Clarens, Free State.

Photo courtesy SATOUR

which tried to confine South Africa's Black population in remote rural hinterlands. Africans who defied this stark scheme were tolerated in cities only on condition of their impermanence, for as long as their labor was necessary for the White economy. When urban Africans ceased to be of use, they had to return to areas designated as tribal.

The result was a constant shuttle movement of people, commodities, and ideas between urban and rural areas that persists into the present. Buses and taxis ferrying men from the city to the countryside are laden with plastic water containers and corrugated iron. In turn, rural, mud-based architecture has been transported to the squatter settlements that are springing up in urban areas. Traditional beer has found a home in

township shebeens. And the ritual slaughter of goats now takes place on the rooftops of high-rise apartments.

The sharp distinction between European architecture and African traditional culture had ceased to exist long before a polychromatic Rainbow Nation came to replace the black-and-white of apartheid. Cultural interpenetration proclaims itself even in the "traditional" brightly painted decorations adorning the walls of Ndebele homesteads, which complexly weave rural with urban and traditional with new. As Rayda Becker, curator of the Gertrude Posel Gallery in Johannesburg, explains:

When asked why they paint the walls of their houses, Ndebele women often provide a general explanation

in terms of ethnic identity: to show the outsider that “Ndebele live here.” Then again the designs they paint — street lights, double-story houses, staircases — are often drawn from visits to the city and poignantly express personal longings: “I paint electric lights on my wall because my house does not have lights.” (Becker 1998:83)

One lesson to be learned from the now-gone Old Pretoria Road settlement is that there has ceased to be — if there ever was — a “pure” indigenous architecture. Different ethnic groups have copied ideas from one another and have increasingly incorporated available industrial materials. For many years, the roof of each building on the Old Pretoria Road was made of corrugated iron, held in place by stones and tires. Some of the windows were standard frames with glass. And the paint was commercial PVA (acrylic paint). The only completely traditional room was the detached kitchen, which was carefully thatched in the time-honored way because thatch, unlike iron sheeting, allows smoke to percolate through.

Ndebele and Sotho builders, whose ancestral lands are close to the metropolitan areas of Gauteng, have been strongly influenced by what is available in the cities. Their homes have become increasingly rectangular rather than round. As Franco Frescura, the country’s leading scholar on rural architecture, explains: “In a society where mass produced furniture and [architectural] fittings are based on the straight line and the 90 degree angle, the curved wall creates too many awkward corners and wasted spaces for it to be fully efficient” (Frescura 1981:75). Corrugated iron, the staple housing material of South Africa’s poor, is made only in rectangular sheets, a shape that encourages straight, right-angled walls. The roofing material is easily available, easily dismantled, and easily

transported whenever the owner is obliged to move on. These qualities made it particularly useful in the era when Africans were under constant threat of removal by the White state. Corrugated iron was a prudent choice — very often the iron roofing was the only part of a home that could be salvaged and reused in a new home in a new location.

But there are regions of South Africa where rural life predominates and where traditional forms of architecture show less industrial influence. In the remote parts of KwaZulu-Natal, Zulu householders have been building hemispherical grass houses in much the same way for the last 200 years. These homes are extraordinarily sophisticated examples



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of thatching technology, often incorporating as many as seven different grass types in their construction to ensure waterproof interiors even in a region notorious for its torrential downpours. The late Professor Barry Biermann, head of the School of Architecture at Natal University, remarked in admiration that this thatching represented a technologi-

country are the white-fronted houses of the Xhosa. Each has the same design: the door always faces northeast, and its surround is always painted with white lime. The back of the house is always daubed with dark clay. The white-painted front reflects the hot morning sunshine and keeps the building cool inside. The dark back walls slowly absorb the

And to those who dwell within, "rural homes have always been more than places of shelter," observes Becker. "Significance was built into their very substance.... Mud and other materials were chosen not just because they were available but because they could be integrated into ritual and social strategies. After a man died, for instance, his house, which was part of his essence, was destroyed.... [B]uilding systems and materials were so flexible that new houses could be erected quickly when people had to move" (Becker 1998:83). In their materials, forms, and construction techniques, rural dwellings today embody centuries of cultural, political, and social history.

Works Cited and Suggested Reading

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Above: Corrugated iron sheets are often used for make-do homes in squatter settlements.

Photo courtesy SATOUR

Left: Rural, mud-based architecture has been transported to the squatter settlements springing up in urban areas. Photo courtesy SATOUR

cal achievement comparable "to that of a Boeing 707 jet" (Frescura 1981:12).

Yet even these structures have been threatened by progress. The encroachment of cities on rural land has resulted in overpopulated rural "slums," which have stripped their neighborhoods bare of most natural resources, including thatching grass. As a result, many modern examples of Zulu housing now incorporate mud walls and iron roofs.

Indigenous architecture often reveals a climatic sensitivity which modern architecture could study with profit. Dotted along the southeastern coast of the

afternoon sun, retaining its warmth for the night, when the temperature falls. Equally sensitive to their climatic context are the Tsonga and Shangaan houses of Mpumalanga in the subtropical northeastern region. Here each house is surrounded by a wide verandah, whose wooden posts support a conical roof. This support means that the internal walls need not go up to roof level, allowing the free passage of breezes to cool the house.

But to a passing visitor, perhaps the greatest charm of vernacular architecture is the way it blends so naturally into its surroundings. As Frescura points out, vernacular architecture is by definition shaped by the materials at hand: grass, mud, wood, and stone. As a result, the dwellings have a sense of belonging in the landscape that those alien modern materials, concrete and steel, can never hope to match.