

# The built environment in Southern Africa: The influence of diversity, culture and tourism on conservation

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## Abstract

South Africa has a diverse and cultural society with a tradition of colonialism, cultural interaction, separatism and democracy. To conserve buildings influenced by South African history, a sympathetic approach to all its cultures is needed to ensure conservation, showing merit in diversity.

To this end tourism in Southern Africa plays a major role in respect of sustainability of cultural and historic buildings.

This paper will demonstrate how this was done in the past and how future conservation will play a major role in showing the cultural history of the Southern African heritage. The paper will be strongly supported by visual images of the South African built environment.

**Keywords:** Diversity, tourism, cultural heritage, conservation, built environment

## 1. Background

South Africa has a tradition of colonialism, cultural interaction, separatism and democracy within a diverse and cultural society. To conserve buildings influenced by South African history, a sympathetic approach to all the cultures is needed, one that will ensure conservation showing merit in diversity.

Tourism in Southern Africa plays an important role in respect of sustainability of cultural and historic buildings.

Southern African conservation in the past and how future conservation will play a role in its cultural heritage is demonstrated in this paper.

## **2. Early architecture: expression of culture and art**

Ancient trading patterns are indications of social and cultural interaction between the people of Southern Africa, Europe and the countries on the Indian Ocean rim and from even further east. Commerce between the people of the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Kingdoms, and the ancient cultures of India and China influenced the Iron Age people of Africa (Bizzell, 2002: 3).

Many examples of South Africa's early building heritage exist and can be visited to appreciate the history and diversity. Some examples are:

- Buildings of the late Iron age. Corbelled dome-houses were very small with tiny entrances built from local stone without any cement or painting (Hartdegen, 1988: 3).
- The Vlakfontein Tswana Iron Age settlement: This settlement in the Transvaal is sometimes called the lost city, it shows remnants of a wonderful early culture. Unfortunately, very few examples of complete structures remain (Hartdegen, 1988: 4).
- Thulamela town, inhabited about five centuries ago, shows the building material of the area and the circular walls, a reminder of the Zimbabwe ruins (Nussey, 1997: 17).
- Masorini is an accurate reconstruction of an African iron-smelter's village that existed in the Kruger Park area during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Nussey, 1997: 17). The traditional Xhosa hut, grouped together to form kraals, have their own style built with stone, mud-bricks and mud-plaster with white washed walls. The white walls and black thatched roofs stand visually pleasing amongst the green hills of the Transkei (Hurford, 1997: 74-75).
- The Sotho hut with its brilliant and subtle decoration and style, usually done by the women of the tribe, is part of South Africa's beautiful architectural heritage (Hurford, 1997: 46), and is now being protected in a cultural village where people find enjoyment and proudly share their tradition, style and culture with visitors, in a manner that conserves some of the Sotho culture tradition. One example of such a village is found in the Golden Gate National Park.

## **3. The beginning of the Western influence**

In 1488 the Cape of Good Hope was said to be discovered by Bartholomeu Dias when he was sailing around the southern most tip of Africa. For the people of Europe the history of South Africa had begun. Since then the view of South African history has broadened to include the evidence of science, archaeology and palaeontology and, in fact, the history of this region stretches back to the dawn of man. Three ships belonging to the mighty Dutch East India Company sailed into the bay of the Cape of Good Hope on 6 April 1652. On board was the first group of white settlers willing to occupy and establish a trade outpost. Previously, survivors from wrecked ships had ascertained that the Cape soil was fertile and that the inhabitants were not cannibals as many Europeans feared (Hartdegen, 1988: 5).

The Portuguese, English, French and Dutch voyagers called at the Cape purely to take on fresh water, fish and game which would sustain them for the remainder of their arduous voyage to Asia (Hartdegen, 1988:5).

#### **4. The Cape Dutch influence on the built environment**

The arrival of the Dutch settlers in 1652 brought another architectural influence to South Africa and today many Cape-Dutch buildings still exist especially on farms. Some of these are amongst the Cape's best attractions, open to tourists where the wine and fruit produce can be enjoyed. Some good examples of Cape-Dutch architecture can be seen at the following places:

- Groot Constantia: The original manor house was developed for Simon van der Stel in 1692 (Hartdegen, 1988:26) (See photograph 1 in addendum).
- Meerlust: The estate belongs to the Myburgh family since 1757. The typical Cape-Dutch style homestead was built in 1776 with material imported from Holland and Batavia, while indigenous timber like yellowwood and stinkwood were used for doors and floors (Hartdegen, 1988: 26).
- Boschendal: A white-washed H-shaped Cape-Dutch homestead, built against the backdrop of the Groot Drakenstein Mountains. Tourists may enjoy and experience the style and culture of an earlier century (Hurford, 1997: 138).

The legal practices of the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the development of racial order, which in turn led to migration to find some Promised Land where people might follow their own cultural practices. This led to inland development. There were a few cultural changes especially regarding language (Thompson, 1990: 68).

#### **5. Architecture and the British influence**

The British occupation of South Africa brought further change to South African architecture and roofing styles. Among the 1820 settlers were trained potters who started producing pan-tiles, which were extensively used as roofing material in the Eastern Cape (Hartdegen, 1988: 48). Amongst buildings built in the British architectural style in South Africa are:

- The Tulbagh town house now known as Mount Bijou: Built between 1812 and 1822 follows the Cape style but with a new English aesthetics of classical symmetry and proportion (Hartdegen, 1988:54) (See photograph 2 in addendum).
- Other examples that still exist are the Union buildings designed by Englishman Sir Herbert Baker in 1910 (incorporating Cape-Dutch, English and Italian renaissance influences), Pretoria station (1908), and St Andrews College in Grahamstown (1913) (Hartdegen, 1988: 99, 114, 120, 121, 129).

## 6. European tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

One should be careful not to judge European architecture as foreign to Africa. European architecture has influenced Africa's culture and expression of life to a great degree. The question that needs to be asked is whether European style is sympathetic to Africa or does it, in its contrast, make a mockery of Africa's own heritage.

Most developments in respect of services, railways, infrastructure and development of towns in the colonial times, especially after the British Settlers arrived in 1820, took place. Great Britain dominated activities in the Cape of Good Hope for many years (Thompson, 1990: 66).

Examples of architecture that find their place in sympathy with the South African environment are found mainly in church buildings and are based on European styles. These punctuate towns and environments in recognition of our temporary habitation and dependence. Among these are:

- Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Port Elizabeth (1866). A free-standing Gothic revival construction, with pointed stonework and plastered dressing. A building with lovely flowing lines (Herholdt, 1994: 109) (See photograph 3 in addendum).
- The Graaff-Reinet Dutch Reformed Church (1887) is a focal point of this historical town with more than 200 national monuments. The church was modelled (like many others in South Africa) on its English counterpart, the Salisbury Cathedral, but adjusted to the South African culture, environment and needs, and stands as an example of faith and tradition (Hurford, 1997: 100 - 101).

Port Elizabeth shows examples of imported styles brought to the area by settlers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today these buildings add to the character of the city. Styles were adjusted to suit the conditions of the new country, examples of these are:

Late Georgian style: Simplicity, chimneyed gables and symmetrical façade (See photograph 4 in addendum).

Early Victorian with classical decorations, decorated barge board and convex veranda sheeting.

High Victorian: A style with strong colours and vertically stressed in the building form.

Regency. A style showing full pane windows grouped in pairs (Theron, 1983: 4-5, 10, 11).

Dramatic changes occurred in many parts of South Africa under the impact of both external and internal influences. Most of the capital investment in the mining industries came from overseas. Kimberley, city of diamonds, and Johannesburg, city of gold, developed and grew.

Johannesburg grew to contain the largest concentration of people in the entire region (Thompson, 1990: 110).

## **7. Independent republics**

During the period of independence of the two inland republics (Orange Free State and the Transvaal) some interesting buildings were built. Examples of these are:

- The Presidency in Bloemfontein (1886) (See photograph 5 in addendum).
- The Fourth Raadsaal (Government building) in Bloemfontein (1893).
- The “Twin Tower Church” in Bloemfontein (1880). A building in the Romanesque Gothic style.
- Church Square Buildings: Pretoria (1890 – 1910). (Hartdegen, 1988: 282-285)

## **8. 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture**

This century may be divided into various phases in the political life of South Africa and its influence on architecture, the Union of 1910, the world wars, the Republic of South Africa in 1961, the apartheid era, and the democracy in 1994. Some examples of these eras are:

- Grootte Schuur hospital in Cape Town (1937).
- Tudor style theatre in Natal (1935).
- Libertas, official residence of the State President.
- Black housing with its box type units to establish the apartheid cities.
- The building boom of the sixties: The University of the North as an example of architecture for black universities; the Civic Centre in Kimberley.
- The Diamond House in Johannesburg is an example of classic architecture of the late twentieth century.
- The Bloemfontein Civic Centre (Hartdegen, 1988: 282, 214, 226, 260, 264, 284, 286) (See photograph 6 in addendum).

## 9. Rural areas – the built environment and sustainability

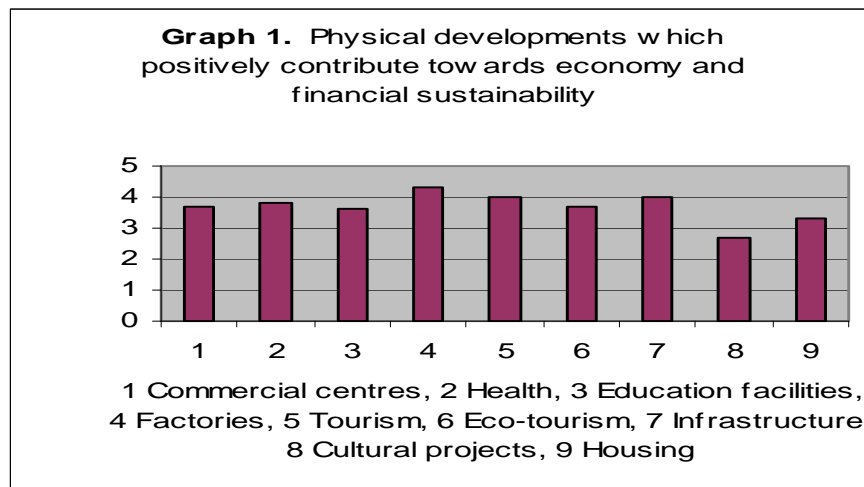
Sustainability in the Southern African context is also linked to the wealth of communities in both rural and urban environments. Sustainability relates closely to environment and the built-environment that establishes the physical environment and a sense of place where people live and have to make a living.

### 9.1 Rural areas

Sustainability in rural regions is seen as part of the building blocks for environmental protection, upliftment and economy.

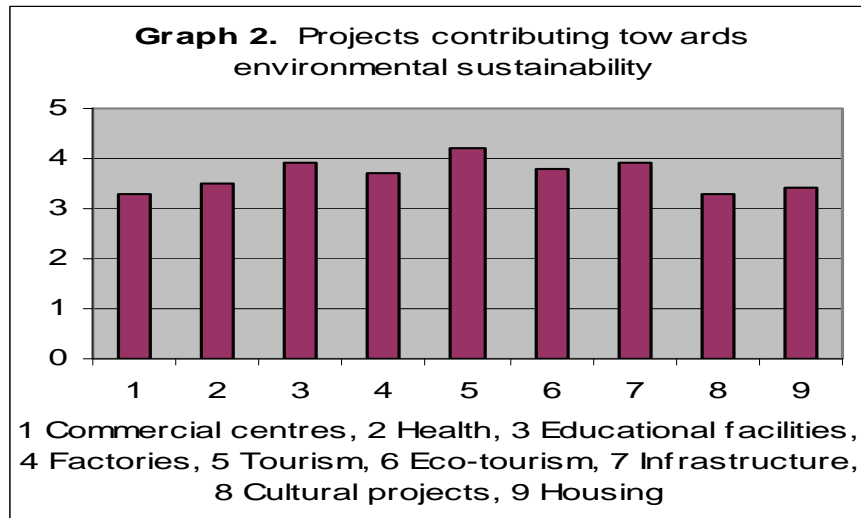
To establish the stability of these building blocks, a study relating to the rural areas of the Free State region was done by the University of the Free State (UFS). Professionals working in rural areas were contacted to test their opinions on the sustainability of their areas. The study showed that tourism will and has already played an important role in sustainability.

Physical projects aimed at manufacturing, tourism, infrastructure development and state spending should contribute to ‘economical and financial sustainability’ (Graph 1).



(Source: Department of Quantity surveying and Construction Management, University of the Free State (UFS))

As far as the ‘environment’ is concerned, tourism, eco-tourism, infrastructure, development and state spending will have a substantial positive influence on ‘financial sustainability’ (Graph 2).



(Source: Department of Quantity surveying and Construction Management, University of the Free State (UFS))

The most pressing problems of rural areas were pointed out as being, the economic situation, urbanisation, limited physical projects and state spending (Verster and Berry, 2004).

The question that should also be answered, in the context of this paper is: what influence does architectural heritage play in the establishment and growth of the tourism industry?

The proposition is that architectural history and heritage help to tell the story of a country, of its pain and achievement, and establishes a sense of culture, art and society, and that tourism helps to relay the country's story and heritage.

If the proposition holds true it establishes the theory that the protection and heritage of architecture will positively influence the economic position of urban as well as rural communities. The sustainability of rural communities is specifically important in the South African context.

## 9.2 Rural needs and the professions

Designers and planners should also have a keen sense of cultural diversity and steps should be taken to make a community interesting and wonderful to experience:

- Open spaces, bars and cafés to foster and develop the night-life economy.
- Council-owned properties to assess their feasibility as arts or cultural venues.
- A youth cultural policy and a circuit for popular activities.
- Conversation and arts initiatives, linking the greening of local areas to culture.

- Attention to street design, furniture and sculptures (Montgomery, 1990: 23).

A further proposition in respect of architecture and the conservation thereof may follow from Montgomery's opinion that examples of architectural heritage punctuate an environment, telling the story of a culture and its sympathy towards history and the present.

By conserving, rebuilding, and actively promoting South Africa's architectural heritage, this may further enhance the country as a tourist destination.

## **10. Present buildings focusing on the South African architectural heritage**

### **10.1 New approaches**

The Peoples Parliament in Kimberley is an example of how Africa's organic architectural heritage and the concept of the people's square or "Patello" finds its way into the present built environment as interpretation of traditional response to shelter, open space, ceremony and celebration. The language of Africa's architecture is further developed in this manner while maintaining consciousness of location.

### **10.2 New trends**

Another reason why South Africa's architectural heritage should be protected, is due to the negative influence of foreign style or rather 'fake' style that has found its way into the South African architectural production system. As Lipman in (Le Roux, 2005: 6) calls it "fake foreign fads" (Le Roux, 2005: 16). This refers to Tuscan, Italian and Georgian styles that have found their way into commercial and residential architecture. In defence of South Africa's European architectural style such as Cape-Dutch, Georgian- or Transvaal-regionalism, Van der Vyver (in Le Roux, 2005: 17) holds that these styles were adapted to local climate, availability of material and craftsmanship.

Joubert (in Le Roux, 2005), argues that Africa has produced some notable Afropean buildings that "...celebrate our socio-economic and environmental peculiarities, while respecting the integrity of Eurocentric design premises." The Mpumalanga government buildings in Nelspruit and the new Constitutional court building in Johannesburg are some notable examples (Le Roux, 2005: 17).

## **11. Socio-cultural impact of tourism**

Any meeting of people has a rub-off effect on those involved in the encounter. In some cases, when two people have a similar cultural background and knowledge of each other's language, the communication is verbal. In most cases it is a silent dialogue. Communication, by a look, a gesture and a general manner of behaviour. This most universal kind of communication is



particularly related to tourists and the natives of the region they visit, for the impact of their meeting is usually brief and superficial. In spite of this, however, tourists carry away powerful images of the places they visit and the native resident receives a strong impression of the tourist and his ethos (Theobald, 1994: 92).

### **11.1 Mass tourism**

Culture and building heritage in this sense, is of course, one of the main motives for travel from the time of the Grand Tour until the time of mass travel. Classical history, Bible history, Egyptian history and the Renaissance were motivations for most tours and the claim to consider oneself a cultured person. The arrival of mass travel made the pursuit of pleasure the main motivation for a holiday (Theobald, 1994: 99 – 100).

Desirable types of tourism that have some or all of the following characteristics are:

- Tourists behave differently to mass tourists.
- They have different attitudes towards the resources they use compared to mass tourists.
- Tourism is usually small scale (low numbers of tourists).
- The local community (hosts) has more control over tourism (Burton, 1998: 138).

The cultural heritage in South Africa needs constant attention and the conservation of buildings to ensure continuous growth of awareness of this heritage attracts the above types of tourism.

### **11.2 Community based tourism**

Community-based tourism is a form of tourist development characterised by the participation of the local community in the decision-making process at an early stage. It has been advocated in Western democracies and widely debated and experimented with, for example, in the United Kingdom in the 1970's in the context of education, housing and leisure planning. It re-emerged to become a fashionable concept in tourism planning in the 1980's, both in the Western democracies and as advocated for third world countries. This was due to the recognition that the costs and benefits of tourism development were distributed unequally between the local host populations and 'outside' interests (e.g. national governments, multi-national development companies), where the local community often suffered more of the costs and experienced less than their fair share of the benefits (Burton, 1998: 139).

Community tourism, where local people participate in the decision-making, is seen as a remedy to these perceived disadvantages. The common assumptions behind the community approach are usually:

- That a unified view of what is locally acceptable can be found.
- Local communities will put a high preference on environmental quality when tourism development decisions are made (Burton, 1998: 139).

## **12. Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper aims to show examples of the wonderful architectural heritage of South Africa as well as the variety of styles, history, materials used, culture and time periods. It also proposes that the protection of this heritage will enhance South Africa's image as a tourist destination.

Historical architecture is important for sustainability and should focus on value at these entities to attract tourism, especially the up-market industry. Research clearly shows the importance of tourism towards sustainability (refer to Graph 1). A country and its citizens must protect architecture to ensure the attraction of tourism for sustainability.

Figure 1 proposes a model of the main elements and links that should influence conservation of the built environment in the South African context, to ensure sympathy for the country's building heritage.

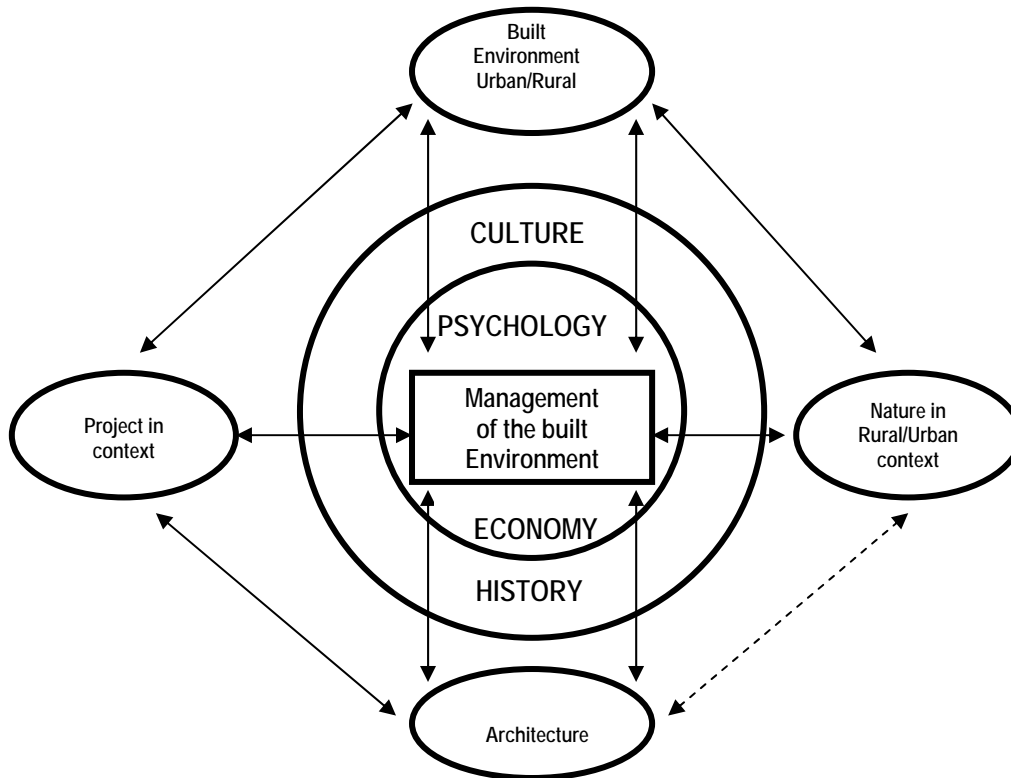


Figure 1- Main elements of conservation of the built environment (Source: Adapted from Verster, 2004)

South Africa has an interesting heritage of building architecture, objects and structures that inherently depicts the people of the country, their culture, politics and inter-relationships. New, Africa-centred architecture that may delight visitors to the country has now begun to evolve.

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