



a South African architecture has been defined at various times, and surveys some of the controversies and issues associated with regionalism in South Africa.

BEGINNINGS OF INTERNATIONALISM AND REGIONALIST RESPONSE

It was not before Herbert Baker designed the Union Buildings in Pretoria, that the conscious search for an appropriate style, a South African architectural identity, became a matter of public discourse (Britz 1982:67). Baker, as well as his associate Gordon Leith, were convinced that an appropriate architecture for South Africa should be rooted in materials that could be obtained directly from natural sources: stones from the koppies, or quarried on the building site, locally produced

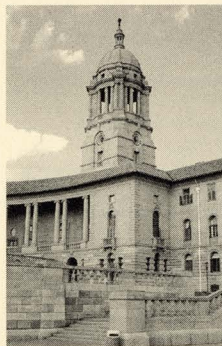
ing devices turned interiors into ovens, and plastered walls with minimal copings tended to crack (Cooke 1993).

A regionalist response emerged in the so-called 'Pretoria School', spearheaded by Norman Eaton, who soon became the country's foremost regionalist architect. Influenced by Gordon Leith, Eaton combined the new technologies of the Modern movement with an acknowledgement of the local climate, most notably manifested in the introduction of shading devices and pitched roofs, a utilisation of local craftsmanship, the use of locally available and traditional materials, and a sensitive response to site-specific topography (Fisher 1997). His residential buildings in Pretoria, such as Greenwood House, aptly illustrate Eaton's principles. Most impressive is perhaps his Nedbank Building in Durban with its screen of glazed terracotta mounted along three sides of this stately office building which served to keep the interior cool.

Regionalism and a South African architectural identity

Sabine Marschall

The much discussed issue of identity, addressed virtually worldwide by Postmodernism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has gained new currency in South Africa as a result of the country's recent political change and process of transformation, which prompted a reassessment of the past and the redefinition of values.¹ The architectural discipline has not been unaffected by this process, both in theory and in practice. As a result, the pursuit of a distinctly South African architectural identity, conventionally labelled 'regionalist architecture', has surfaced again.²



However, the issue of regionalism versus internationalism has occupied architectural debate throughout the twentieth century in one form or another. The following article examines how

Herbert Baker: Union Buildings, Pretoria

bricks, massive pieces of timber with natural curves, all of which were to be used in a climatically suitable way.

In the 1930s, a new spirit of internationalism spread with the introduction of the early Modern movement. Strongly promoted by its protagonists at the Witwatersrand University it soon influenced architecture throughout South Africa. The Martienssen House in Johannesburg, for example, epitomises the young, avant-gardist architects' fascination for industrial materials and construction methods, functionalist planning and the purist machine aesthetic that emulated celebrated European prototypes by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and the other great masters of what became known as the 'International Style' (Herbert 1975). Despite active promotion, particularly via the country's then foremost architectural journal, the *South African Architectural Records*, the International Style quickly proved ill-suited to local conditions, particularly climatic: the flat roofs and windows leaked, the lack of shad-



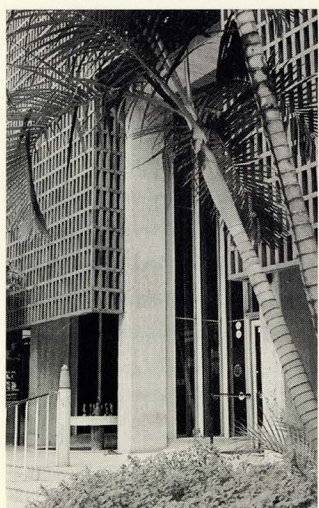
Example of International Style building (block of flats in Durban) showing cracking plaster.



Norman Eaton: Greenwood House, Pretoria



Norman Eaton: floor in Polly's Arcade, Pretoria



Norman Eaton: Nedbank, Durban

More importantly, Eaton added to the Baker/Leith heritage an 'African' quality, derived from what he called his passion for Africa (Harrop-Allin 1985), and an emphasis on art and craft. The paving of Polly's Arcade in Pretoria, made from the off-cuts from a local stone-masons yard (Fisher 1997), was inspired by African motifs. The door handles of the Pretoria Netherlands Bank are based on the famous historic Benin bronze figures. For his painter friend Alexis Preller, Eaton designed a cavernous brick studio, containing traverse arches that suggest an inspiration from basketry or indigenous Zulu beehive huts. Eaton frequently explored the possibilities of brickwork in his creation of evocative shapes and richly textured, decorative and tactile surfaces - qualities that he perceived to be inherently African.

Eaton furthermore revered the Cape Dutch style as the European settlers' first vernacular. While Baker saw a South African architectural identity emerging solely out of the land and its natural materials, Eaton acknowledged the country's people - both Africans and Europeans - and the diverse heritage of their material cultures.

INTERNATIONAL MODERNISM AND POSTMODERN CRITIQUE

A number of architects in other regions - Gawie Fagan in the Cape and Barrie Biermann in Natal, for example - developed regionalist idioms of their own along similar lines to those already noted. Fagan's private residence in Cape Town and Biermann's in Durban are strongly inspired by each respective region's vernacular but are, at the same time, decidedly modern and incorporate elements eclectically drawn from other sources (Fagan 1985; Biermann 1985). Nevertheless, a cursory glance at the central business districts (CBDs) of South Africa's major cities reveals that the bulk of commercial and public architecture in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s continued to follow international models of Modernism with little concern for a regionalist adaptation, apart from methods of sun control. On a political level this period coincided with the introduction and consolidation of apartheid and South Africa's increasing international isolation, resulting in an attitude of defiance and conscious or subconscious competition with the major centres of the Euro-American world. The high-rise office towers

and ranch style suburban homes clearly define South Africa's identity as a leading centre of commerce, administration, and Western civilisation - in short, an extension of the Western world on the southern tip of the African continent (Fee 1991).

Postmodernism, with its critique of personal alienation in architecture, and its interest in *genius loci* and sense of place, again prompted a surge of interest in regional architecture in the early 1980s. The emphasis on context as a crucial determinant of architectural design followed. Cooke (1984) advocates 'an architecture of place', McTeague (1983) 'an architecture related to place', while Fagan (1983:50) declares 'context and relation to the environment in the widest sense' to be the first rule of his architectural language.

'An architecture of place', according to Cooke (1984:25) takes advantage of the particular natural characteristics of places (climate, topography, flora, etc), constructs or reinforces identifiable urban spaces or enclosures, is highly accessible to people, allows occupancy to appear on the outside, and makes use of the skills and devices of generations of design (such as scale, proportion, hierarchy, colour, etc) in order to achieve meaningful architecture. Compared to Eaton and the older regionalist tradition, the emphasis reflected in these criteria clearly indicates a shift towards humanist values, an acknowledgement of history and recourse to classicism, and what Britz calls (1982:66) 'timeless principles of architecture'.

The topic of regional architecture and related issues were debated at length at the 1983 ISAA Congress under the heading 'Design&Culture'. Postmodernism's interest in heritage and questions of identity and culture encouraged a fresh look at the local vernacular, including rural African building traditions. Articles such as Leon van Schaik's (1986) *Reflections on the study of indigenous or self-made architecture* and its relevance to the practice of architecture suggest a new awareness of the significance of the African contribution to the country's architectural heritage. Moreover, the recognition of the significance of cultural aspects and their influence on architectural design

Modernist high-rises in Durban's CBD



Norman Eaton: Netherlands Bank, Pretoria, door handles



Norman Eaton: Studio for Preller, Pretoria





HSRC Building, Pretoria



ICC and International Hilton, Durban



are reflected in Amos Rapoport's (1983:34) call for 'wide-ranging comparative cross-cultural research', which emphasises the need for 'understanding the cultures of different groups - their structures of values and symbols, their patterns of behaviour in different settings, their propensity to establish domains and clusters - and the influence of these on the physical nature of their environment'.

Promising as the climate of the early 1980s was in terms of the search for and development of a genuinely South African architectural identity, the reality of building practice turned out otherwise. To paraphrase Anthony Lange's (1984:24-25) apt words of criticism, Postmodernism encouraged architecture to become a media event, concerned with striking images and the architect as star, prompting even countries with magnificent examples of historic architecture to succumb to Dallas. The monumental block accommodating the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria could be regarded as one such example. As Abel (1986:40/11) points out, the complex problem of expressing local character and regional identity was all too often reduced to the simple placement of a traditional 'hat' on top of standard Modern forms. The new plurality of styles, on the surface an indicator of cultural diversity and search for architectural identity, was in actual fact another internationalism in disguise, comparable with the eclectic historicism of the nineteenth century in Europe.

One reason for this development certainly is that the issue of regionalism is a highly complex, ambiguous and problematic one. The problem starts with the definition of the term. Kenneth Frampton (1987:313), who introduced the seminal concept of 'Critical Regionalism', insists that regional architecture is not to be confused with the vernacular. Regional architecture is rooted in Modernism and, most importantly, dependent on 'some kind of anti-centrist consensus - an aspiration at least to some form of cultural, economic and political independence'. Spence (1985:23/1) corroborates this view when he states, '[t]rue regionalism can only be seen as a subversive tendency in today's world, dominated as it is by the insensitive and cynical internationalism of big business interests, often in the guise of power politics, which generally operate against local self-determination and regional differences.'

PROBLEMS WITH REGIONALISM

The surge of interest in regionalism that had characterised the mid-1980s soon waned during the 1990s and gave way to a new internationalism which dominated architecture, art and other spheres of material culture. Although this phenomenon may be observed in many countries around the world, in South Africa it coincided with the period of gradual liberalisation and dismantling of key apartheid laws, the lifting of the cultural boycott and the country's emergence from international political, cultural and economic isolation. Architecture clearly reflects this, particularly in buildings that address an international audience, such as the new International Convention Centre and nearby International Hilton Hotel in Durban.³ South Africa, while asserting a position of autonomy and independence, nevertheless wishes to be a well-liked player, actively engaging with the international community. Fears of Americanisation and foreign domination appear to be suppressed by curiosity, the anticipation of opportunities and the prospect of economic advantages.

In the eyes of today's generation of global villagers, regionalism is often regarded with scepticism. This sentiment is hardly new. Regionalism has time and again become associated with parochialism, sectarianism, intolerant conservatism, and oppression, as is aptly demonstrated by the alarming experience of architecture's role in Nazi Germany. The vigorous debate about a regional architecture in South Africa in the 1980s has prompted commentators like Leon van Schaik (1986:19) to explicitly raise their voices against regionalism, reminding us that 'we are citizens of the world' and not a 'sectarian group'. Van Schaik suggests that a distinction should be drawn between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' regionalism. He fails to clearly define either, referring in the former only to Voysey and the Arts and Crafts Movement. The latter presumably denotes the 'recently reintroduced parlour game "Regionalism"' of which he is so critical.

Apart from such ideological issues, there are also a number of theoretical and practical problems with regionalism. For example, if regionalism is based on the premise of building with local resources, then one must define what exactly counts as a local resource. Opinions vary as to whether 'local materials' are strictly indigenous materials or locally available materials and whether or not any imported materials are acceptable (Boussora

1990). Other problems raised by Boussora, in his study on regionalism in Algeria and the Middle East, include the practical aspect of implementing regionalist theoretical premises and the fact that projects featured in literature on regionalism are mostly small-scale buildings, which provide unsuitable models for the problems and pressures inherent in most contemporary urban buildings.

Furthermore, if regionalist architecture is inspired by the local vernacular and seeks to reinforce characteristic forms of local cultural identity, then one encounters two problems. The first is the problem of origin, or deciding what is truly indigenous to a particular region. As Abel (1986) has pointed out, the rural traditional vernacular is often far removed from the original indigenous architecture, as a result of outside influences and adaptations to new technologies. The second problem is particularly pertinent to the South African context, where the 'rainbow nation' concept is still the official position taken in describing the country's diverse ethnic composition. Whose culturally specific architectural forms should a regionalist idiom be inspired by and whose cultural identity should thus be celebrated?

A further point to consider in this regard is the legacy of South Africa's apartheid past which promoted various forms of traditional culture to underline the distinct identity of ethnic groups. As a result, white architects designing facilities for black Africans, were encouraged to produce an 'ethnic design', by endowing the architecture with typical references to the user group's respective culture (Noero 1994). Frequently such references remained limited to a superficial application of decorative patterns inspired by local traditional dress, beadwork and pottery. In other cases, as on a number of the buildings on the University of Zululand campus, recognisable imagery was transplanted from 'typical' traditional African homesteads. Needless to say, the local user community was generally given no say in the matter. As Noero (1994) has emphasised, based on his own extensive experience as an architect, most black Africans today resent architectural forms smacking of this gratuitous, patronising 'ethnic design' heritage. Architects (including Noero), in their turn, conveniently exploit this resistance to defend their personal preference for a neo-modernist, often high-tech architecture on the grounds of its 'cultural neutrality' and



University of Zululand, residence building

absence of problematic cultural baggage (Noero 1994; Shiels 1998).

FACTORS OBSTRUCTING REGIONALISM

South Africa is hardly the only country straddling the regionalism-internationalism divide. Most Third World countries have acknowledged the unsuitability of a wholesale adaptation of International Style architecture in terms of climatic appropriateness, spatial norms, consideration of local resources and cultural aspects (Boussora 1990; Lewcock 1998). In many African countries, the attainment of political independence encouraged an anti-Eurocentric, regionalist architecture as part of the establishment of a new post-colonial cultural or national identity. Elleh (1997) describes a number of examples in Uganda, Burkina Faso, Zambia and Zimbabwe that make reference to local traditional architecture, while at the same time employing a modernist architectural language. However, as in South Africa, such examples are more often the exception than the rule. The case of Namibia, the continent's most recently independent country, aptly demonstrates how the overwhelming influence of Western models mediated through architectural journals, the professional aspirations of practising architects and the desire of ambitious developers, local authorities, and businesses to build striking prestige objects, tends to crush efforts towards a more humble but appropriate, regionalist architecture (Peters 1997; Lipman 1997).

Roger Fisher (1998) recently questioned why major examples of contemporary architecture in South Africa demonstrate a blatant disregard for simple rules of climatic control. He suggests that architects have a propensity to think in images, with the result that the memory of another building is stronger than the most scientifically concocted charts and tables when designing a new building.⁴ Presumably, most of the images that stay in architects' minds are of those attractive international models featured in the architectural glossies. At most these models are adapted - in varying degrees - to the local context.

Boussora (1990:70) lists a number of factors that tend to obstruct the development of regionalist architecture, including the international media, the sophistication of travel and com-

munication, economic growth, the standardisation of building elements and systems, and legal requirements. For South Africa one may add to this list the attitude of local authorities and inflexible building regulations. However, the most crucial factor impeding the success of a regionalist architecture in post-apartheid South Africa - according to numerous testimonials of architects throughout the country - seems to be the aspirations of both clients and architects. It is the image of the flashy modern home that clients aspire to along with prosperity and the desire for the convenience of a Western life style. At a time when South Africa has rejoined the world community after years of political, economic, social and cultural isolation, many South African architects aspire to assert themselves and prove their artistic and technological sophistication in the international arena by producing prestigious designs that can compete with international standards. After all, as Peter Davey (1997) recently pointed out, the appeal of a somewhat avant-gardist architecture is enhanced by the fact that it establishes the person who commissions or purchases it as culturally progressive.

In South Africa a strong argument could certainly be made in favour of a regionalist architecture, but it must be acknowledged that regionalism is a complex and controversial issue. As has been demonstrated above, it is an issue that does not only affect the architectural discipline and profession, but which has much wider implications. Regionalism is as much about culture, politics, economics, education and technology, as it is about architectural design. If the full complexity of the issue is not taken into account, South Africa is unlikely to successfully move towards a true regionalist architecture. The problem would appear to be not so much how to achieve this, than the consideration why it should be done.

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NOTES

- This article is based on a paper presented at the South African Association of Art Historians Annual Conference in Pretoria in July 1998.
- The country's foremost architectural journal and debating forum for architects, the *SA Architect*, clearly reflects that issues of regionalism, identity, sustainability, etc have gained currency again. See for example articles like E Schaug's (1998) 'Language, architecture and identity' or C S Studio's (1998) 'An African approach'. An entire issue of the journal was recently (July/August 1997) devoted to Sustainable Architecture. The theme and programme of the upcoming International ArchAfrica Conference in Durban, *Towards an architecture of conscience*, appears promising in continuing along these lines. The most important indication for a renewed interest in regionalism is that the design for the new Constitutional Court in Johannesburg is based on markedly regionalist premises (Anonymous 1998). Given its high symbolic value, this structure could have a potentially powerful effect in terms of the future direction of architecture in South Africa. It should be noted that there is also a renewed interest in vernacular architecture, which is reflected in the recent publication *Africa Style in South Africa: Pondokkies, Khayos and Castles* by Pamela Strauss.
- The ICC was designed by Stauch Vorster; Hullen Custers Smith and Johnson Murray Architects; the International Hilton by FGG Architects. Both buildings were completed in 1997 and have been proudly presented by the city and architectural journals as among the city's greatest architectural achievements.
- 'Does the image making become so overriding that the pragmatics go by the board. I have another explanation. We are fed the information in the wrong way. Architects have visual recall. If it does not make a picture, it does not become part of the designer's data bank. The memory of another building is stronger when designing than all the most scientifically concocted charts and tables. That is how designers should be taught and that is how designers should inform themselves' (Fisher 1998:22).