Book Review

> ## Lize Kriel

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

lize.kriel@up.ac.za (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2933-2215)

Hidden Pretoria

Introduction

What an experience it was to have reviewed this book during lockdown – being lured to so many Pretoria places, some which I know and others which would have been quite inaccessible to the local tourist even if there had not been health-related restrictions on our movements. On the other hand, none of the places in this book are, in fact, 'visitable' at all, except in the imagination, because these images are not "the real". They are too poised and delectably mediated to be matched by any embodied experience in actual time. The forgone past which so many of them invoke, only exists in the historical consciousness of those they entice to wonder. To wonder – in every semantic sense of the word … that is indeed what this book accomplishes. It pierces our visuality, or established world-view, and infuses it with new ways of seeing. In a sense, this book is a guide to reconfiguring a visual landscape – a decolonial one, if one wishes, because the reconfiguration entails the de-assembling of staid and fixed impressions and the rearrangement of old beliefs based on newly revealed and newly-considered (old) information.

The text plays with the notion of hidden in a number of ways. Some of the places featured are indeed not accessible to the general public, like the private residence of artists Rina Stutzer and Angus Taylor (Swart & Poust 2019:230-237), or the abandoned modern marvel of a building that once housed the long-since disbanded Transvaal Provincial Administration (Swart & Poust 2019:178-187). Other sites/sights have become hidden because of the ways in which they have been naturalised, or neutralised, in

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our daily traversing of the cityscape – or problematised in our political consciousness (think Voortrekker Monument, Swart & Poust 2019:168-173). This category of places are so familiar, so stereotyped in the way we notice and process them as signifiers, and move on, that the signified itself, with all its multi-perspectival possibilities, had become, so to speak, veiled. Swart and Proust's book lifts those veils and, with the combination of seductive photography and architectural-cultural-social historical ekphrasis, they shock and awe our minds into new awareness-es of the compositeness of our surroundings.

I must confess that I write this review having recently listened to and then read Cape Town-based anthropologist Francis Nyamjoh's musings on the nuts and bolts of African cultural positioning amidst calls for decoloniality. With his appeal to 'make scholarship more convivial by factoring in human mobility as the norm of being human' he encourages a view of culture that acknowledges its compositeness, 'recognising and providing for incompleteness in being and becoming [rather] than a violent severance of interconnections'. Thus, he demonstrates ways for us to adjust our thinking towards a decolonial methodology in our postcolonial timeframe, looking back at colonial remainders not just as anomalies to be obliterated, but as possibilities for 'creative innovation through copying, imitation, mimesis and mimicry'. He relays his appeal for a convivial approach to an earlier suggestion by Ali Mazrui that, through history, in Africans' responses to challenges, the 'intention and results are far less about rupture or radical breaks, than about accommodation, interdependence and conviviality. Africa and Africans, it would appear, are more inclined to social repair than social rupture'.[1]

This approach becomes helpful when reading *Hidden Pretoria*, because this book is definitely not about sentencing discredited legacies to any dustbins of history. It is a stock-taking of the built environment *in situ*, an account of what had been repurposed, discarded, relegated, elevated, venerated, renovated. It takes a long view at old remainders, provides historical context offering younger generations with previously unfamiliar connotations, and it does so in an architectural vocabulary that enables more precise and informed description. Swart and Proust are a cunning team: they use their respective media in conversation with each other and with the viewer/reader. They make you look up, down, deeper, lower, closer … slower… and further. As a city, compared to Johannesburg or Cape Town (which both already have their Hidden Histories), Pretoria has been lacking behind in developing a scholarly biographical imprint as a designer-ly place of note. This book changes that. I was particularly fond of Proust's '90 degrees-up' images of buildings' atriums. What a lovely set of greeting cards these images would make (Figure 1).

FIGURE **Nº 1a**

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Greetings from *Hidden Pretoria.* Palace of Justice (Swart & Poust 2019:8).
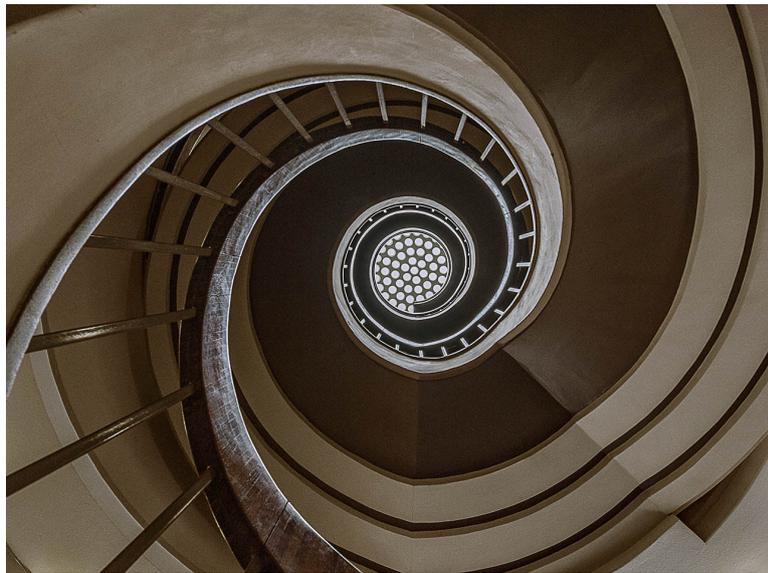
FIGURE **Nº 1b**

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Greetings from *Hidden Pretoria.* New Administration Building (Swart & Poust 2019:138) on the University of Pretoria's Hatfield Campus.

FIGURE **Nº 1c**   ‹

Greetings from *Hidden Pretoria.* Old Merensky (Swart & Poust 2019:136) on the University of Pretoria's Hatfield Campus.

No wonder that Swart and Proust make such a formidable team. Heritage-focused design is Johan Swart's thing. This is what he teaches, along with architectural history at the University of Pretoria, while also curating the architectural archives in the care of his department. Cape Town-based Alain Proust, the photographer who can capture 'the essence of a building in a single frame' (cover text), brought his years of experience to the project, as he had also done for the *Hidden Johannesburg* book.

Quite a different kind of Pretoria could have been foregrounded in *Hidden Pretori*a ... I think of neighbourhoods I grew up in, live in, visit or drive-through to drop off kids, where churches, if not designed by Gerard Moerdyk in the first half of the century,

tend to look like DIY projects from the 1980s or repurposed warehouses from the 1990s. There are combinations of pre-con walls and steel palisades in front of houses, ceramic wall decorations of cacti and oversized sombreros; stairwells up to porches held in place by castings of large fishes standing on their tails. We have mock-rock cladding in Tuscanesque estates, garden gnomes and armless *Venus de Milos* in front of zinc-roofed houses. Yards sprout little constructions to house additional tenants or to serve as *lapas* (with thatched roofs). There are green lawns next to courts cleared from all growth and straightened and hardened to complement the clean angles of the house's structure – and these days, more increasingly, green outdoor carpets strewn with plastic scooters and inflated bounce-donkeys. Everywhere, the doors and windows are over-bejewelled with burglar bars, not always quite complementing the initial design.

I somehow think Proust and Swart would even have been able to elicit an enchanted gaze at this Pretoria too. Perhaps Jan Shoba Street would have been a bit more of a challenge because it is so conspicuously confused in its pretentious commercialised inklings of classical revival, goth(ic), American West, modern, postmodern, Afro-futurist and farm-yard apocalypse all on one street block.

But no, in their chest of hidden treasures, with the magically lit up interior of the derelict auditorium of the Capitol Theatre on the cover, Swart and Proust only packed, what they considered … dare I impose William Morris on them? … the truly useful and beautiful. In what respect? First of all, their focus is, with a few exceptions, not on residential sites, and where such examples are included, they serve to make an architectural point: House Jooste (Swart & Poust 2019:200-207) is Pretoria's ode to Le Corbusier and true to the house's bending of 'earlier modernisms towards tectonic, expressive and communicative design' has challenged suburban Pretoria to awaken from its mediocrity (Swart & Poust 2019:208-209).

This book's criteria for the beautiful and useful, were what could be included to contribute to its remarkably dense repertoire for a tour (perhaps even course) of (western) architectural styles and materials over (the past hundred and fifty?) years, without once leaving Pretoria. The tour is inevitably then also weaving in a history of the capital city which, owing to various less-flattering connotations with the apartheid government mentality of the 1980s, has once been referred to as Snor City.[2] The term is used far more endearingly now that Pretoria has morphed into a Cool Capital over the past decade.

(Western) as marker for the historical tour of architectural styles that *Hidden Pretoria* offers, should stand in brackets, because it is not quite correct. The book also features

FIGURE **Nº 2**

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Every object tells a story, National Cultural History Museum (Swart & Poust 2019:224-5).

the Mariamman Temple of the local Tamil-speaking Hindu community in Marabastad (Swart & Poust 2019:142-7) and the Greek Orthodox Church in Brooklyn with its splendorous icons decorating the interior (Swart & Poust 2019:19-9), and the old Nederlands Bank headquarters invoking precolonial African sculptural traditions in details such as door-handles (Swart & Poust 2019:166).

The past hundred-and-fifty years of Pretoria's existence as a town/city is not an accurate parameter for the book's offering either. Look at the photographs of the storage spaces (Figure 2) in the lower levels of the National Cultural History Museum, for example (Swart & Poust 2019:220–7). The repurposed former mint building has storeys-full of neatly catalogued and pristinely preserved objects collected since the very early years of Bantu-speaking communities' encounters with European visitors and collectors. Utterly displaced as they are from their initial sites of use and means of display, they are lying there waiting to tell their stories.

Juxtaposed with such specialised underground preservation in regulated conditions of presently not-displayed objects in the National Cultural History Museum, is the National Natural History Museum. Located to the east, on the opposite side of the
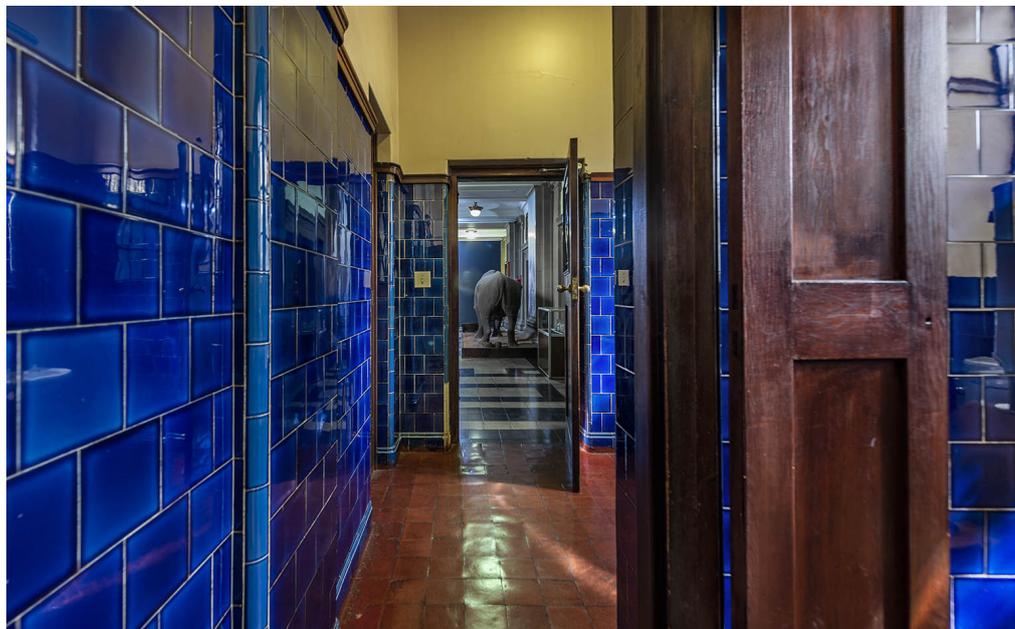
FIGURE **Nº 3**

Stuffed rhino (Swart & Poust 2019:119).

city-hall, parts of its public displays have been unchanged for so long that the benign neglect has turned this site into a museum of a museum. Proust's photograph featuring the remarkably beautiful and well-preserved blue art nouveau tiles in the building's restrooms, also includes the behind of a stuffed rhino (Figure 3). The impression it leaves, that the animal has just used the toilet and is returning to its position in the display, is as macabre as it is a sheerly delightful comic moment.

Is this then a book of 'laughter and forgetting'[3]? – yes, and no …. It left me with some sense of resignation, that some things are indeed just, to 'let go', but for all the rupture laid bare on those surfaces where neglect and decay are setting in, this book also showcases the new, and it definitely sparks the imagination for convivial ('Cool'?) engagement with Snor City's colonial remainders.

Notes

1. See: F.B. Nyamjoh, Mobility, globalisation and the policing of citizenship and belonging in the 21st Century. Keynote Speech, Southern African Historical Society 27th Biennial Conference themed, *'Trails, Traditions and Trajectories: Rethinking Perspectives on Southern African Histories'*, held at Rhodes University, 24-26 June 2019; F.B. Nyamjoh. 2017. Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the currency of conviviality. *Journal of African and Asian Studies* 52(3):253-270.

2. Afrikaans singer, Bernoldus Niemand (James Philips) eternalised the name in a song in 1985.

3. With apologies to Milan Kundera (1979).