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# TOWARDS LOCAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

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## Introduction

In 1965, Paul Ricoeur (2007:42), referring to globalisation, highlighted the following paradox: 'The encroachment of universal civilization, while improving some qualities of life, erodes those that are most vital and creative – one's attachment to and knowledge of self in relation to place'.

Ricoeur (2007:52) believes that 'we have to go back to our own origins' in order to deal with the expanding universal culture. He states that in order to confront a foreign culture, one must first have a culture and identity of one's own. Part of this need is for an architecture that will express local identity. Since then globalisation as a phenomenon has established itself as a dominant economic and cultural reality. This has greatly increased the need for groups and countries to express their distinct cultural identities in the face of the threat of universalisation. South Africa is no different as far as this is concerned and the changes that have taken place since 1994 have dramatically increased the need the country has in this regard.

Since 1994, when government policy shifted from separation to nation building, South Africans have been undergoing profound psychological adjustments and a search for identity: whereas previously the focus was on separate identities, it has now moved to discovering and developing a common one. Melissa Steyn (2001: xxii) notes that 'situated in an existential moment

that combines unique intersections of throwness and agency, [South Africans] are selecting, editing, and borrowing from the cultural resources available to them to reinterpret old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities, while yet retaining a sense of personal congruence'.

Identity, in this instance, is not understood as something that is stable or fixed, but rather in the post-modern and post-colonial understanding of it as unfixed, fluid or 'in process' (Farber 2009:20). It is thus not seen as something to be achieved but rather as 'a production that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (Hall 2006:233). Stuart Hall (2006:247) describes identity 'not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak'. Self-representation is therefore not to be found in a fully-fledged, stable, singular and definitive identity, but rather as a mechanism for opening up new avenues for exploration and understanding. Thus, in contrast to the view that cultural identities constitute the common historical experiences and common social codes, this article supports the position that 'as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become' (Hall 2006:236). It seems logical that diversity, which is an essential aspect of

South African life, could help shape a particular local cultural identity. However, at the same time there is much that South Africans have in common and there are certain contextual commonalities, for instance climate, range of available building materials, construction methods and lifestyle practices that are shared across the country. These commonalities should form the basis from which an architectural identity must develop.

Hall highlighted the need for cultural identity to be expressed or represented. Leora Farber (2009:11) contends that art and design play a fundamental role 'in the formation and expression of post 1994 South African visual identities ... [and] broader redefinitions of South Africa's social and cultural identities'. Architecture as a most public art must thus also fulfil its role in this regard. Suggestions on how this might be done are not new: 'Ora Joubert<sup>1</sup> (2009:12) refers to the relevance of South African architects 'modern regionalist tradition, premised on the appropriate response to context, climate and circumstance'. Roger Fisher (2009:24) holds that the results of the challenge of balancing the demands of brief, site, users and resources will always be unpredictable and that because of this, a 'South African architecture of distinction will always be emergent, generated at the threshold of the possibilities of the locale'. However, Amos Rapoport (1969:47) found that house form is not simply the result of a few contextual and practical determinants or other casual factors, but the consequence of a whole range of socio-cultural factors. Thus, while the appropriate response to site, context, climate and circumstance must play a very important role, other socio-cultural factors that reflect the local situation must also feature in the quest to develop an appropriate architectural identity. Read together, all of the above imply that differences, based on local specifics must form part of, and enrich, any expression of a South African national or regional identity.

Alexander Opper (2009:49) suggests that rather than hurriedly trying to establish an 'all-encompassing expression', a 'more reflective attitude of observation and careful analysis of the existing situation may be beneficial'. This broader, more inclusive and developmental attitude thus seems appropriate, particularly in the light of South Africa's history of separation. Such an approach is in line with the understanding of cultural identity expressed in this essay.

The foregoing implies that South Africans should continue to work conscientiously towards developing a unique representation of who we are at this point in our developmental process. In addition, architecture should also play an active role in shaping national identity and not merely reflect the existing situation. In doing so, the reflective all-encompassing attitude suggested by Opper implies that architects should not only consider the specifics of the macro- and micro-locality, but also a variety of factors, including existing knowledge in the form of precedent<sup>2</sup> and theory.

This essay presents three case studies with the aim of extracting transferable design strategies that can be applied by architects during the process of developing a national architectural identity, even though this is a goal that will continuously remain 'in process'. From a historical perspective, it should be considered that Southern Africa has been involved in foreign trade since the eleventh century when Middle-Eastern and Eastern traders established trade links with communities, such as those at Mapungupwe, along the Limpopo River. The Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488 and in 1497, Vasco da Gama traded with the KhoiKhoi/KhoiSan<sup>3</sup> for the first time. In 1652, a commercial enterprise called the Dutch East India Company established a trading station at the Cape of Good Hope. Under Dutch rule at the Cape, this gave rise to the development of the somewhat inappropriately

named Cape Dutch style<sup>4</sup> of architecture which, it is proposed here, was a statement of a unique local identity within a global economic system.

Since Cape Dutch architecture developed as a direct result of the colonial system, and because the Dutch East India Company had financial profit as its main objective – just as modern multinational companies do (Giliomee 2003:1) – it was selected as the first case study, despite the geographic limitations of the style. However, the exploration is aimed at identifying principles that are transferable and could be applied in all geographic areas, thus negating the regional limitations of the style.

As stated previously, South Africa's need is not a unique one: the current global economic system has been likened to neo-colonialism and a more subtle form of cultural dominance, one that has resulted in the watering down and wearing away of local identity, culture and differences. This situation has come in for criticism from many sources and has brought about a renewed interest in cultural identity, uniqueness and architecture that relates to its particular socio-geographic situation. This awareness has resulted in a range of related architectural theory, the most prominent being Critical Regionalism,<sup>5</sup> a theory that has found widespread international acceptance. It is believed that these theoretical positions can provide many pointers that may assist in South Africa's on-going search for an appropriate architecture. Thus, the second case study considers these theories in order to extract from them certain principles that could be transferable and could guide the development process.

Because the acknowledged Critical Regionalist Gawie Fagan has interpreted Cape Dutch architecture in a modern idiom, the third case study focuses on his work. The previously mentioned theory is used as a basis,

again in an endeavour to find principles that could find application on a wider scale.

However, this choice of subjects does not negate what can be learnt from other locally developed architectures (for instance that of the Ndebele) or from case studies that consider more recent developments (such as the newly constructed soccer stadiums), which will also provide valuable insights and could form the basis of future investigations.

A literature study was used to extract some guidelines that reflect a portion of the existing knowledge that could be considered and applied across geographical areas during the process of developing an appropriate local representation of the country's architectural identity.

## The socio-political history of Cape Dutch architecture

I believe that at its zenith Cape Dutch architecture functioned as a statement of identity and assertion within a global economic system. I will show that the colonists, the majority of whom hailed from countries other than the Netherlands, at first strove to be treated as Dutch citizens by the authorities at the Cape. However, as time progressed, their unhappiness about their political and economic situation continued while their wealth increased. This resulted in their growing alienation from the Dutch as they developed an increasingly 'local' identity, and this found expression in their buildings.

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch were the most successful business people in Europe (Thompson 1995:33). Modern South Africa began as a by-product of Dutch enterprise when the Dutch East India Company

(henceforth referred to as the Company), as previously mentioned, sent Jan van Riebeeck to establish a replenishment station for their fleets sailing to their Eastern empire centred in Batavia and Java. It was not their intention to start a colony; according to Giliomee (2003: 1, 7), they did not see this replenishment station as anything more than a business venture and their sole objective was to maximise profits.

Van Riebeeck landed in 1652. In December 1658 he faced the first signs of disquiet amongst the colonists when 14 free burghers<sup>6</sup> handed him a petition demanding to know what price the Company was going to pay them for the wheat they had sown (Giliomee 2003:1). In Giliomee's view the essence of the ongoing friction between the free burghers and the Company was of an economic nature, but with distinct socio-political undertones. The Company, being a business enterprise, expected its servants (as they regarded the colonists) to produce the prescribed fresh food for its ships and to accept the low prices the Company set for their produce in order to maximise its profits. The free burghers, in turn, struggled to survive economically and demanded the rights and status of ordinary Dutch citizens.<sup>7</sup> Their demands included fair prices and proper economic opportunities (Giliomee 2003:1-12). In the first fifty years after Van Riebeeck's landing, little building of note took place (De Bosdari 1964:11).

According to De Bosdari (1964:11), by 1692 the community was small, perhaps amounting to a thousand people. However, a fact that is often overlooked is that persons of Dutch descent accounted for less than half of the European colonists at the Cape: a census conducted sometime after 1692 found that the colonists consisted of 842 Germans, 14 German-Swiss, 39 Danes, 36 Swedes, 11 Norwegians, 14 Flemish and 529 Dutch (De Beer 2000:147). This situation became more marked after the arrival of more than 200 French

Huguenots towards the end of the seventeenth century (Pearse 1956:50). Hugh Floyd (1983:28) underscores this situation and points to the fact that the Dutch East India Company recruited its workforce from a wide range of coastal countries, ranging from Brittany to Denmark and other countries that constituted the Hanseatic League.<sup>8</sup> Heese (1971:21) estimates that in 1807 only 36,8 per cent of the white population consisted of persons of Dutch descent, marginally more than the 35,9 per cent who were of German descent. Thus, it would be wrong to think that the majority of the colonists of European descent were 'Dutch'.

Nevertheless, these colonists did not remain separate groupings: Pearse (1968:2) mentions that by 1730 the inhabitants had grown into a homogeneous group. He attributes this to 'time, intermarriage, and the stresses of the Van der Stel controversy', which combined the different European elements into a single group into which newcomers, because they were so few, were absorbed quite easily. However, Giliomee (2003:10) ascribes this development to pressure from the Company that did not wish to allow the formation of nationalist enclaves. What is more, regardless of the actual reasons, the colonists of European descent no longer spoke a pure form of Dutch but rather an early version of Afrikaans (Scholtz 1980:9). Giliomee (2003:xiv) notes that while they came to the Cape as sailors and soldiers who worked for the Company, they were amongst the first colonial groups to sever their ties with their families and countries of origin. He also points out that after the area was annexed by the British, few returned to Europe and most elected to stay on (Giliomee 2003: xiv). The foregoing indicates that a unique local culture was rapidly taking shape.

Slaves imported from Malaysia, Asia, Madagascar and Central Africa to provide labour dramatically swelled

the numbers of the settlement. According to Giliomee (2003:28), by as early as 1730, there were already more slaves than free burghers in the area. The slave community also contributed to the unique culture (particularly the culinary culture) and the language that was developing.

The expansion of the colony continued and by 1740, farms had been established as far as two hundred miles from Cape Town (Welsh 2000:64). Thompson (1995:41) contends that the creation of a free burgher or settler community resulted in conflicts owing to increasing competition between officials and settlers regarding access to markets and trade restrictions imposed by the Company: Willem Adriaan van der Stel's efforts at self-enrichment<sup>9</sup> and the successful efforts of the farmers to get him recalled are well documented (Thompson (1995:41). However, allegations of corruption continued.

Despite the economic restrictions, the affluence and economic prosperity of the Cape and particularly of the established farmers received significant boosts from wars between various colonial powers (Pearse 1956:84). This was because the increase in foreign shipping that resulted from these wars, coupled with the stationing of foreign troops at the Cape, provided economic opportunity to the farmers: the economic restrictions instituted by the Company allowed the farmers to sell to the foreign ships at market-related prices, in contrast to the low prices that applied to Company ships. Consequently, the farmers managed to throw off the economic shackles imposed on them by the Company, a situation that resulted in their expressing their newfound wealth in the design of their homesteads (De Bosdari 1964:13).

Before this, the homesteads at the Cape were rather simple and crude three-roomed rectangular buildings

following the pattern of the long-house of Northern Europe from which the Cape Dutch style developed (De Beer 2000:148; Fransen & Cook 1980:1; Floyd 1983: 28). Many of these later had a kitchen added to the back, thus forming a T-shaped building with the original kitchen becoming an additional bedroom, and finally, when another wing was added parallel to the first, an H shape (De Beer 2000:149). A central gable started appearing towards the middle of the 1700s. This too was not a typically Dutch feature: in the Netherlands where end-gables dominated, the central gable was a less common feature than in the greater coastal belt that extends from southern Denmark to Germany and Flanders (Fransen & Cook 1980:4; Schellekens 1997:sp).

According to De Beer (2000:150), the crudeness of the buildings prompted Commissioner Simons to ask for someone 'who understood something about building 'to be sent to the Cape in 1708. This resulted in the arrival during 1783 of the first formally trained architect, Louis Thibault (De Beer 2000:150). On his arrival, Thibault, who was a product of the Royal Academy of Architecture in Paris, described the state of affairs as follows: 'The Burgher gentry employ labourers instead of architects – whence [*sic*] constructions are at once vicious, grotesquely ugly and doubly costly' (cited by De Beer 2000:138).

Thibault's arrival coincided with the period during which French and foreign troops were stationed at the Cape and the subsequent sharp rise in income of the farming community. This gave rise to 'an expensive fashion of living' in which 'everyone was striving to become possessed of a handsome house filled with costly furniture' (Pearse 1956:84). De Bosdari (1964:14) points out that most of the notable examples of the Cape Dutch style were built or received major alterations during the period 1750 to 1825. He ascribes this to three successive spells of prosperity owing to

great expenditure by the Dutch East India Company, foreign merchantmen and the take-over by the British.

This period was a period of upheaval and uncertainty, both in terms of relations between the colonists and their colonial rulers and in terms of relations between competing colonial powers. The conflict between the colonial powers saw the Cape being occupied by the British in September 1795 (Pearse 1956:87), only to be restored to the Dutch when it was placed under the rule of the Batavian Republic in 1803 before being taken over by the British for a second time in 1806.

Even before the first British occupation, the Dutch influence was waning, with many colonists paying little respect to the authorities who at the time were experiencing financial difficulties (Pearse 1956:84). Events in Europe and America furthermore prompted the colonists to demand their own constitution (Pearse 1956:79), and in March 1779, they submitted a letter containing complaints to the Lords Seventeen in the Netherlands. This was followed by a number of memoranda of complaint lodged with the Dutch authorities. Furthermore, the colonists supported the pro-French Patriot party in the Netherlands while the Company supported the Orange party (Pearse 1956:86). Significantly, at this time Pure Dutch was mostly used only by the officialdom in contrast to six local variants of early Afrikaans spoken in the colony by the local population (Scholtz 1980:9). In 1789, the first skirmishes occurred with the Xhosa people along the eastern frontier and in 1794, owing to the failure of the government to respond to their complaints, the Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam districts declared themselves independent.

This period, characterised by wealth and disenchantment among the predominantly non-Dutch colonists, international upheaval, a reduction in the influence

of the financially struggling Company and the successive changes in governing power saw Cape Dutch architecture develop from its Hanseatic (and not Dutch) origins to reach its zenith under the leading influence of a classically trained French architect (De Beer 2000: 150). It was the homesteads of the newly wealthy farmers where the style reached its climax: according to Pearse<sup>10</sup> (1968:15), 'the peculiar characteristics of the so-called "Cape Dutch" houses' are best observed in the country house and homestead. He continues that it is these 'characteristics which make them so totally different from their European prototypes.'

The development was influenced significantly by the local climate, materials and available skills (Floyd 1983: 31), to constitute a unique, eclectic mix of Hanseatic long-house, local materials, French neoclassicism, Germanic rococo, and Dutch baroque (De Beer 2000:147-150). It is based on this original or unique eclecticism that I propose that the Cape Dutch style of architecture functioned as a statement of a unique local identity (and financial achievement in defiance of economic restriction) during a time of global political and economic domination and competition. It would thus qualify as an appropriate precedent from which to identify principles that could be combined into a series of strategies which might be useful as part of the process of developing a unique identity for South African architecture.

## The Cape Dutch homestead

Peter Buchanan (in Fagan 2005:1) states that Cape Dutch buildings, 'although small and placed with great sensitivity in relation to the hugely impressive landscapes ... are not shy'. He describes how their white walls and the prominent and elaborate central gables assert a manmade order onto the landscapes (Figure 1). This



**Figure 1:** Cape Dutch Homestead, Constantia, Cape Town, 2008. Photograph by author.



**Figure 2:** Werf at Boschendal, Franschhoek, 2008. Photograph by author.

effect was greatly enhanced by the use of axis and sense of order and ownership (domination) being extended by the regularity of avenues, vineyards and orchards, laid out in patterns that embellished the landscape, uniting all into a single whole (Fagan 2005:1).

De Bosdari (1964:31) and Fransen and Cook (1980:33) describe how the homestead typically was laid out: the most important space was the *werf* (yard). It lay either in front, around or behind the main house, which in turn formed the focal point of the homestead. This generous, roughly level, lawned *werf* was enclosed by varying combinations of whitewashed screen walls, the so-called *Jonkershuis*,<sup>11</sup> wine cellar, *waenhuis*<sup>12</sup> and a variety of animal pens, fowl runs, enclosed herb gardens and stables (Figure 2). The screen walls featured tall entrance piers connecting them to the tree-lined avenue of approach which connected the homestead to the landscape, as described by Buchanan (in Fagan 2005). Other characteristic elements were the slave bell or bell tower (Pearse 1956:115) and nearby family graveyard enclosed by its own low, enclosing wall (De Bosdari 1964:31).

The plan form of the manor house was normally symmetrical and formed a T, H or U shape (De Bosdari 1964:19). The central gable formed the most striking and characteristic feature of the house and thus of the homestead (Pearse 1956:113). These gables exhibited a great variety of treatments and were decorated with moulded plasterwork. Their designs were not typically 'Dutch' but rather adopted Renaissance and Baroque features from areas as distant as England, Northern Italy, Southern Spain and Austria (De Beer 2000:150).

Because of the restricted availability of natural stone that could be quarried and dressed, local bricks, which weathered badly, were the most common building

material. Owing to their porosity, the brick walls had to be covered with plaster and lime wash to enhance their waterproof qualities (Pearse 1968:7). Thus, all the walls were of light colour that reflected brilliantly in the sunlight. Typically, the houses featured a wide stoep (verandah), thatched roof, entrance door and fanlight with two-and-a-half windows spaced evenly on either side of it. Other features included lesser side gables and an ornate chimney over the open fireplace in the kitchen (De Bosdari 1964:19-23). The interiors of the buildings contained finely proportioned and impressively scaled living rooms with high ceilings (Figure 3).

Pearse (1968:15) describes a number of features that were developed as a result of the South African summer heat and bright sunlight. Some of these are the relatively small areas of glass; high ceilings covered by heavy roofs with good insulation value, which meant that these rooms stayed cool during the day; and window shutters to minimise the direct heat that came from sunlight streaming through the windows. Another feature that was developed because of the heat was regularly used outdoor living spaces. They took the form of ample stoeps or enclosed courts, often shaded by oaks or covered with trellised vines so that they would still allow direct sunlight into the interiors in winter (Figure 4).

The result was a unique style of architecture that was well suited to the climate and lifestyle of its inhabitants, exuding a certain 'boldness' and unity of expression. The interior spaces were linked to the outside living spaces. These combined with the bigger outdoor utility spaces, which in turn were joined to the vineyards and other agricultural spaces by the regular layout of the vineyards and roads. Thus, each of the 'parts' combined to form a 'whole' which left a strong sense of place and impression of the homestead's 'presence'.



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**Figure 3:** Boschendal interior, Franschhoek, 2008. Photograph by author.



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**Figure 4:** Stoep at Meerlust, Somerset West, 2008. Photograph by author.

Thus, historical elements and locally developed building methods were combined with elements and features used elsewhere. These were adapted to suit local climate, lifestyle and culture to create a unique hybrid style of architecture (De Beer 2000:150). The style was applied consistently to all the buildings in the group and these were then combined via screen walls to create unity. This had the effect of making the homestead appear bigger and more important. In addition, the homesteads were inserted into the landscape with great care and sensitivity (Buchanan in Fagan 2005:1). The connection with the land was visibly extended through the planning and layout of the surrounding landscape, which was done to form an extension of the design of the homestead in order to increase the overall effect of oneness and place-rootedness.

Following from the previous sections, I believe that architecture that best reflects local identity will continue evolving from:

- evolutionary development of historic precedent;
- incorporating new developments and innovations in an eclectic manner;
- the use of locally available materials and the adoption of new practices to make their use possible;
- an understanding of context and the particularity of the community;
- sensitively inserting buildings in the landscape and/or urbanscape in a way that shows a connectedness with the context, thus creating a positive environment, even in low-cost developments; and
- spatial layouts that combine separate elements into a greater whole.

## Regionalism, identity, place, and culture in architecture

Paul Ricoeur's previously mentioned observation gave rise to a renewed interest in regionalism and, amongst

other debates, the formulation of the Critical Regionalist position. The term 'Critical Regionalism' was first used by Tzonis and Lefaivre in 1981 and was later made famous by Frampton in *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an Architecture of Resistance* (2002; first published in 1983). Simply put, it is an approach to architecture that, in the face of encroaching globalisation, strives to counter the lack of uniqueness by the use of local references in order to give a sense of identity, place and meaning.

The belief that regional difference is meaningful or important is not new: the Roman author Vitruvius referred to this principle in his writings (Lefaivre & Tzonis 2001:3). Consequently, Lefaivre and Tzonis (2001:1) suggest that the rivalry between regionalism and globalism is one of the most important struggles to have shaped social, political, economic and cultural debates over the last few years. The ongoing environmental crisis and corresponding questions about globalisation and its role in the current economic crisis have meant that the Regionalist standpoints remain relevant. Tzonis (2003:11) refers to the need to reassess Critical Regionalism as a 'bottom-up approach to design that recognises the value of identity of a physical cultural situation rather than mindlessly imposing narcissistic formulas from the top down'. He holds that a need exists within the current ecological, political and intellectual crisis to continue the exploration into Critical Regionalism and develop the potential of this design strategy.

Tzonis (2003:20) describes this approach as one that 'recognises the value of the singular, circumscribes projects within the physical, social and cultural constraints of the particular, aiming at sustaining diversity while benefiting from universality'. Thus, it is not opposed to the trend towards using advanced technologies and an expansion of globalism – it is merely concerned about the manner in which globalisation takes place. As such, this

form of regionalism is clearly different from what Lefaivre and Tzonis (2001:4-6) describe as Picturesque Regionalism, Romantic Regionalism or Over-Familiarizing Regionalism.

Frampton (2002:82) describes the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism as mediating the effect of encroaching globalism through the use of elements and principles, derived indirectly from the peculiarities of the particular place: the unique features in their natural, urban and social contexts. Marybeth McTeague (1983:47) reports that Frampton explained that regionalism is not populism, neither should it be confused with vernacular architecture. According to Frampton (quoted by McTeague 1983:47), regional architecture is 'anti-centrist and anti-universal modernism. However, while it uses local images and values, it combines them with modernism and examples from elsewhere'. Lefaivre and Tzonis (2001:9) emphasise the need for 'defamiliarization' by using the place-defining elements in a new or 'strange' way as opposed to the conventional or historical way.

The work of the Critical Regionalists and their focus on local identity somewhat overlaps with the work of other noted theorists. A few years after Ricoeur's article was published, Amos Rapoport (1969:47), as mentioned previously, found that house form is not simply the result of a few contextual and practical determinants or other casual factors, but the consequence of a whole range of socio-cultural factors such as the ideal life envisaged by the population, religious beliefs, family and clan structures, social organisation and economic activity. He contends that these factors should be seen in their broadest terms and that religion, for example, might include perceptions of the cosmos. Christian Norberg-Shulz (1986:sp) states that elements such as settlement patterns, house forms and materials can provide clues to humankind's relationship with

its environment or 'place', including identity and socio-political situation. According to him, the relationship between a person and a place has to do with a much deeper process of identification or 'becoming friends' with a particular environment. This in turn presupposes that places have characters or attributes that distinguish them from other places and provide them with a unique presence, a view that has major implications for the characterless housing developments (at both ends of the economic scale) being erected across South Africa.

Chris Abel's (2000:141) view is that so many analogies have been drawn between the symbolic function and identity of architecture that it has become one of the principal metaphors in architectural discourse. He cites the work of Kevin Lynch, John Turner, N John Habraken and others as examples in this regard. Abel (2000:141) also refers to the significance attached to the concept of a place identity; the 'interrelation of the cognitive processes, social activity and formal attributes' or particular place and thus regards this as a critical element in any attempt to deal with the encroaching universal culture.

The need to be able to identify and interact with architecture at a personal level is thus well established. However, as has already been pointed out, this does not necessarily justify or point to historicism<sup>13</sup> in architecture as the solution. Frampton (2002:81) comes out strongly against this tendency when he states that architecture can only be sustained as a critical practice if it distances itself from both the myth of progress and a reactionary and unrealistic impulse to return to historical architectural forms. Equally, as shown previously, it does not point to a rejection of current technology or architectural practice; as Ricoeur (2007: 51) states, 'only a culture that is capable of assimilating scientific rationality will be able to survive and

revive'. Ricoeur continues by saying that the solution cannot simply be to repeat the past but rather to take root in the past in order to invent.

Frampton (2002:88) furthermore cautions against the over-reliance on the visual experience and hence architectural form and proposes that the tactile resilience of the body and its ability to read the environment 'in terms other than sight alone' should be the route to follow. The emphasis should thus be on the essence of the place: those aspects that make the place unique such as climate, light quality, geography, and urban character, and on terms that include its tactile experience and not only the visual.

Thus place and the local or particular, including the natural environment, become important. Frampton (2002:86) states that regionalism necessarily involves a closer relationship with nature (including climate). He points to what architect Mario Botta called 'building the site' or the respect for and acknowledgement of the site's history in both the geographical, geological and agricultural senses. Frampton (2002:87) continues that this approach has the 'capacity to embody in built form, the pre-history of the place, its archaeological past and subsequent cultivation and transformation across time'. Hence, the particulars of the local place can find expression while resisting the lure of sentimental historicism, even when the particular place does not take cognisance of nature or natural features, as is the case with many low-cost housing developments in South Africa.

Norberg-Shulz (2000:221) makes the point that the image of the world, manifested by the art of the place, does not simply depict the existing situation, but rather interprets it. Thus, according to him, 'the basic act of architecture is to understand the vocation of the place' (2000:221). In this way, we protect nature and become part of totality. Therefore, belonging to a place

provides one with an existential foothold. Accordingly, if we give expression to the vocation of the place, we have to recognise that man is an integral part of the environment and the natural whole. He maintains that our failure to understand this oneness will result in further environmental disruption. Tzonis (2003:6) agrees with this position by stating that if globalism or globalisation were to be left unchecked, the results would be 'economically costly, ecologically destructive and calamitous to the human community'. Thus, identity and uniqueness are tied to environmental sensitivity and responding to the natural situation of the particular place.

Following from the theory presented above, I believe that architecture that best reflects local identity will continue evolving from:

- valuing local identity and place making;
- recognising the particular physical and cultural situation;
- using local references to give a sense of identity, place and meaning;
- defining projects with regard to the physical, social and cultural constraints of the particular locality;
- aiming at sustaining diversity without ignoring global developments and innovation;
- using elements and principles derived indirectly from the peculiarities of the particular place;
- using place-defining elements in a new and unusual way rather than in the conventional or historical way;
- considering a whole range of socio-cultural factors in their broadest terms;
- incorporating scientific rationality;
- not placing a heavy emphasis on the visual experience and architectural form;
- reflecting the particulars of the place in ways that will be experienced by a variety of senses;
- acknowledging the local geographical, geological and agricultural history;

- interpreting the particular situation rather than simply depicting it; and
- recognising that mankind is an integral part of nature and the natural environment.

## The work of Gawie Fagan

Gawie Fagan's body of ideas could be interpreted as forming a bridge between Cape Dutch architecture and Critical Regionalism. Much has been said and written about the work of this renowned architect, who was awarded the South African Institute of Architects Gold Medal of Honour in 1985, and whose work is mentioned three times in a review of contemporary South African architecture by Pattabi Raman (2009: 14-18). However, the limits of this article and its topic of necessity restrict the scope of this section to the most pertinent characteristics of his work.

In introducing Fagan's book *Twenty Cape houses*, the erstwhile editor of the *Architectural Review*, Peter Buchanan starts with the following paragraph (2005:1):

Informed by his deep knowledge of and love for the Cape, Gabriel Fagan's houses grew out of the specific conditions of that region at the southern tip of Africa that includes the Cape Peninsula and its extensive hinterlands. The houses nestle into and address the grandeur of their landscapes while also responding to nearby natural features and buildings. They modify and make the most of their varying climatic conditions and they frame their frequently magnificent views. And though they are tailored to the contemporary lifestyles of their owners, they are also inspired by the local historical and vernacular architecture. Unequivocally modern, they are also broader in their concerns and deeper in their roots than the most modern architecture. In short these houses belong in the present,

the more so because they are rooted in place and past.

Fagan (1983:50) believes that an appropriate Southern African architecture, by definition, has to show strong regional differences and that it must reflect local cultural and climatic variations. He continues by stating that any architectural language has to be shaped by the architect's total experience. The South African Institute of Architects, in awarding his *House Swane-poel* with an Award of Excellence, cited it as a 'highly original example of regional architecture and a sophisticated synthesis of the traditional and the contemporary' (Cape Institute of Architects: Awards of Merit Assessors 1983:38).

Revered as an exponent of Critical Regionalism (Theron 2009:366), Fagan (1983:50-51) identifies the following characteristics of Cape Dutch architecture as those that are often reflected in his own work:

- reverence for context and relationship with the environment, including the way buildings are inserted in the landscape;
- progression of experiences: spaces and views used sequentially to create an interesting journey as one approaches and moves through the building(s);
- integrity: structural integrity, consistent detailing and use of local materials;
- careful proportioning and retaining a human scale;
- clearly ordered layouts;
- explicit use of symbols such as chimneys to signify the heart of the home and the provision of food; and
- recycling and building on an existing infrastructure as essential elements of sustainable design.

In his introduction to Fagan's book, Buchanan (2005:2) highlights a number of practices that Fagan adopted from Cape Dutch architecture. These include that his work creates harmony between the man-made and natural environments by combining them into a larger



**Figure 05:** *Die Es*, Cape Town, 2010. Photograph by Leon Krige.

‘whole’. His use of white-painted bagged<sup>14</sup> finish to fair-face brick walls has become an abstraction of the soft and plastic qualities of the lime-washed walls, while his use of colours (white-painted walls) and materials (clay floor tiles) are ones normally associated with Cape Dutch architecture. His attentiveness to local climate and choice of climatically appropriate materials also falls into this sphere. These features can be found in Fagan’s house *Die Es* (Figure 5).

Other characteristics of Fagan’s work, as identified by Buchanan, are attention to function and orientation, his use of forms that are stripped of decoration and abstracted, often the pure product of structural resolution and a general economy of means. This attitude is echoed in the careful attention paid to building assembly, including construction details, and house designs that are eminently liveable and homely despite their modern design.

While Fagan acknowledges that what is appropriate to the Western Cape might not be appropriate elsewhere in the country, other characteristics that resonate with the Critical Regionalist approach that can be identified in his work are his revolutionary development and adaptation of historical forms and elements, and regard for local climate, lifestyle and landscape. His work is furthermore characterised by strong connections between interior and exterior spaces and the exterior spaces in turn to the natural and cultural landscapes, and a willingness to include structural and technical innovations in building design.

Based on the foregoing description, I believe that architecture that best reflects local identity will continue evolving from:

- acknowledging regional differences and local cultural, lifestyle and climatic variations;

- synthesising the traditional and the contemporary;
- having reverence for context and relationship with the environment;
- sensitively inserting buildings in the landscape;
- making use of local materials;
- making explicit use of symbols;
- incorporating existing structures and buildings where appropriate;
- striving to create harmony between man-made and natural environments;
- using climatically appropriate materials;
- adapting historical forms and elements in revolutionary ways; and
- being open to including structural and technical innovations.

## Synthesis

The three sets of indicators outlined above contain significant overlap and repetition. This supports the validity of the findings of the individual explorations. Having considered the indicators identified by relevant theory and local precedent, the different results can be reduced to the following list of design guidelines:

- Develop historical precedent in evolutionary and revolutionary ways.
- Use locally available and climatically appropriate materials and adopt innovative practices to enhance their use.
- Focus on place making by sensitively inserting buildings in the landscape and doing so in a way that will reflect a connectedness with the landscape and context, thereby recognising that mankind is an integral part of the natural environment and the natural whole.
- Develop spatial layouts that combine elements into a greater whole.
- Value local identity: reflect regional differences and local physical, cultural, lifestyle and climatic

variations, in their broadest terms, and in new and unusual ways rather than in the conventional or historical way.

- Aim at sustaining diversity without ignoring global developments and innovation.
- Avoid historicism: do not place an overly heavy emphasis on the visual experience and architectural form but rather reflect the particulars of the place in ways that will be experienced by a variety of senses.
- Interpret the particular situation rather than simply depicting it.
- Make explicit use of symbolism.
- Where appropriate, incorporate existing structures and buildings into new developments.

While the overuse of visual reference is discouraged in the foregoing synthesis, it should be noted that contemporary society is also part of a media culture that places much importance on the visual, as pointed out by theorists such as Nicholas Mirzoeff and Douglas Kellner (Farber 2009:10-11). This implies that we should not underestimate the importance of including visual reference. It should simply be done without succumbing to the temptation of historicism and should rather be confined to the use of colour, texture and light quality, among other things.

## Conclusion

The importance of a distinctive South African architectural identity was highlighted in this article, and it was suggested that a unique South African architectural identity should develop over time through a process that should also refer to existing knowledge in the form of historical precedent and established theory. Some guidelines that can be applied in designing buildings so that a unique South African architectural will continue to evolve were identified by way

of research and based on historical precedent and established theory.

The three case studies revealed a fair degree of overlap and agreement. In general, it was found that the focus should be on the local and the particular but without ignoring international development and innovation. Precedent should be included in both evolutionary and revolutionary ways in order for the development required by the process to take place. In doing so, care should be taken to avoid an overemphasis on the visual and on historicism, while local context, lifestyles, climate and materials should function as important influencing factors.

The problem is a complex one and it is by no means suggested that the guidelines that emanate from this exploration are exhaustive: it is recommended that other historical precedents such as Ndebele architecture and the work of Peter Rich and other relevant theory should also be explored. In addition, all of the results should be considered with due regard to the opinions expressed by other academics and practitioners.

The guidelines identified are some that could be applied by South African architects in refining a unique architectural identity: an architectural identity, unlike a corporate image or a branding exercise, is not something that can be developed hurriedly by a group of specialists. It has to be pursued by many over a sustained period of time and will develop continuously as society undergoes constant change. While regional difference is accepted as a given, it cannot develop unless it reflects the situation as it exists in all areas, including low-cost housing developments, and unless the development takes place at all levels and in all spheres of society and improves the quality of the environment in general.

This implies that efforts to house the masses of people residing in informal settlements should form part of the process. By implication, the characterless mass housing projects currently undertaken by the government are therefore unsuitable from this point of view – and many others. More appropriate alternative processes that will allow for the incorporation of local specificity have been proposed by theorists such as Charles Corea, John Turner, David Dewar and the National Housing Forum, to name but a few.<sup>15</sup> Alternatives that include local socio-geographic specifics and architects and owners who can work towards the development of a distinctive identity do exist. Unless shifts in policy that support this very important need are implemented, a truly representative architectural identity that is weakened by this anomaly is the best that can be hoped for.

At the same time, the exotically styled developments that are driven by the financial motives of private developers and are taking place at the other end of the development spectrum are equally problematic. Here efforts by individuals and organisations such as the South African Institute of Architects to sensitise the broader public about the inappropriateness of these stylistic marketing gimmicks must be expanded. If these changes in preference and policy are not brought about, a distinctive South African architectural identity will remain weakly represented, with concomitant disadvantages.

## NOTES

- 1 'Ora Joubert is a former Head of Department: Architecture at the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State.
- 2 Owing to its history, South Africa has historical precedents that can help in this search. Cape Dutch and Ndebele architectures are two such historical styles.

- 3 Contact with European colonialists had devastating implications for the KhoiSan and led to their demise by the early eighteenth century (The Khoikhoi [sa]:[sp]). The delimitations of this article do not allow space to deal with this in more detail.
- 4 As will be shown, the Dutch component of the colonialists constituted only slightly more than a third of the white population and the style of architecture drew characteristic elements from a much wider area of Northern Europe.
- 5 Critical Regionalism is explained in a subsequent section.
- 6 Former Company servants who were allowed to farm independently.
- 7 According to Giliomee (2003:5), the Dutch had a very advanced civil rights system in place to which people from across Europe aspired.
- 8 The Hanseatic League was formed around the middle of the twelfth century by German and Scandinavian seafaring merchants. At its peak, the Hanseatic League covered the entire North Sea and Baltic Sea Regions and it stretched hundreds of miles inland along rivers from the Rhine to the Daugava (Mills 1998:sp).
- 9 According to Thompson (1995:41), Willem Adriaan's father Simon started this practice.
- 10 While Prof Pearse's books on the Cape Dutch style of architecture appeared in 1933, they are still regarded as the authoritative source on the topic.
- 11 The house of the eldest son or heir apparent.
- 12 Literally the 'wagon house' or place where the wagons, carts, etc. were stored when not in use.
- 13 In the broadest sense, historicism means the recourse or reference to historical style.
- 14 Cement slurry wiped over fair-faced brickwork with hessian bags.
- 15 The spatial constraints of this article do not allow further exploration of this.

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