

THE CHALLENGES FACING MODERNISM IN SOUTH AFRICA – HOW CAN WE PROTECT THE LEGACY?

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INTRODUCTION

Once I had begun to develop this paper and after reconsidering the title of ‘The Challenges facing Modernism in South Africa, How can we protect the Legacy’ I came to the realisation that it a far wider range of work than just the Modern Movement in SA that requires our attention. In effect the title should really refer to 20th century architectural heritage generally as so much of this important legacy is under threat at present in our country. So with this in mind I hope that you will allow me to address the broader scope of our built heritage from the 20th century.

In order to understand the complexities of protecting our built heritage, and in particular the heritage of the 20th century I need to briefly explain how the legislative framework protecting heritage resources works in South Africa.

The protection of the built environment in our country- in terms of heritage resources- falls under the ambit of the S A National Heritage Resources Act No 25 of 1999. This ambitious and well-intentioned piece of legislation was the result of an extensive process of public debate over a number of years as well as involvement by a wide range of specialists in the heritage sector, but not necessarily many in the architectural field. A number of examples of appropriate heritage legislation from other countries were also interrogated and reference was made not only to the Australian heritage legislation, but also to that of New Zealand and Canada amongst others.

In simple terms the NHRA establishes a three tier system of heritage management with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) being the national statutory body charged with the implementation of the Act, certain responsibilities relating to both the identification and management of heritage resources are intended to be devolved down to Provincial level while the day- to-day management of the built environment, particularly that contained within urban areas, should be managed by the local authority.

The Act addresses a wide range of heritage including architecture, archaeology, shipwrecks, cultural objects, burials and grave sites, paleontology, meteorites, monuments and memorials. Attention is also paid to the significance of intangible heritage as it relates to these categories of heritage. So, all in all it is a wide-ranging legislative framework that regulates not only the built environment but a number of other heritage resources. This is understandable given the previous legislation (the National Monuments Act No. of 19..) that was informed primarily by a system of Western (European) values with a focus on the building as a monument, and made little if any reference to the heritage and legacies of the broader population, in particular the African and indigenous people such as the Khoi. The resulting shift in emphasis by the heritage authorities to the identification and protection of what we can refer to as previously marginalized heritage is very necessary and must be supported but it has unfortunately led to a certain lack of emphasis/interest being placed upon the responsibilities set out in the Act with regard to the built environment, leaving this to the Provincial Heritage Authorities and in due course to the local government (municipal) authorities.

So, having understood the background framework relating to heritage protection in our country one can come to a clearer understanding of the threats that are attendant to the heritage of our built environment in general. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the clause (Section 34.(1)) that provides a 'catch—net' protection to unidentified heritage resources relates to buildings and structures that are 60 years of age or older. Given that this provides us with a date of 1949 as a cut-off date for the referral of buildings to the relevant heritage authorities it is clear that the vast range of modern movement and contemporary architecture enjoys no formal protection in terms of the heritage legislation.

To be quite frank, even buildings that are dated prior to 1949 are not recognized by most of our local and provincial authorities (Cape Town, Pretoria/Tshwane/Johannesburg/Durban might be notable exceptions but even this is not guaranteed, public pressure often highlights dangers that face this kind of building). Architecture of the Art Deco period has only recently received general acknowledgement of its heritage value (Cape Town hosted the very successful recent international Art Deco Congress for example). And again, while the larger cities have sufficient resources to identify and protect these valuable buildings many of our smaller towns have a wonderful stock of small Deco buildings that are continuously under threat from insensitive development. But that is a topic for another paper!

Even within the ranks of the professionals it is only over the past five years or so that there has been an upsurge in interest in the identification and listing of the work of architects working within the modern movement and several of my colleagues will be delivering papers on the fascinating work that was produced throughout South Africa in this genre and the concurrent research that is being undertaken.



House Polikansky in Bantry Bay, Cape Town. Designed by Pius Pahl, and one of his most admired private houses, this was one battle that we did not win, the building is shown in the process of demolition.

This professional interest has been sparked by a number of factors, not least that of the proposed demolition or inappropriate alteration proposed to a number of contemporary buildings of value. I will refer to a few specific examples towards the end of this paper. The formation of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee for 20th Century Heritage has encouraged and supported the drive to become involved in the identification of broader 20th century heritage, however probably the first major driver in this initiative was the call by the UIA to identify 10 outstanding examples of 20th century architectural heritage.

Of course, while taking on the challenge with great enthusiasm, as is so often the case when working with a very restricted range of resources, which in this particular case was the membership of the South African Institute for Architects Heritage Sub-committee whose members comprised 4 or 5 people, we didn't get very far and long after the UIA cut-off date the project remained in its infancy with only a few buildings making it onto our fledgling list! However over the next year or so we persevered as a small

group and started on the marathon task of listing those buildings that, in our opinion, were worthy examples of 20th century architectural heritage. At the same time initial contact was made with DOCOMOMO in Paris where I was received enthusiastically by Ann-Laure Guillet and departed with a range of useful and inspiring publications also learning that we had at least one individual DOCOMOMO member in South Africa! (Hannah le Roux). While on the subject of DOCOMOMO I am sure that our colleagues will be pleased to know that the South African Institute of Architects has joined as an Institutional member and that we hope, as an architectural community, to engage in a much more regular and structured fashion with the initiatives of the organisation.

Eventually the listing project started to take shape and the real work of developing criteria for the identification and listing of architecture could slowly begin. As with all projects of this nature one makes valuable contacts with colleagues working in the same field; discoveries were made that, in fact, there is a broad range of research that is taking place but in an isolated and rather ad-hoc manner and there is a need for an integrated and coordinated approach to assembling all this information. For example, my colleague Andre van Graan, who teaches at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town,, is presenting a paper at this symposium, and has been working on his doctoral thesis on the Modern Movement in Cape Town. Andre has developed an extensive register of architects and architectural firms and the buildings designed by them in the period 1930's to 1950, valuable work indeed. Colleagues in Pretoria and Johannesburg are similarly working on research projects that encompass the architecture and architects that have made a major contribution to the work of the 20th century in that part of the world.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGISTER OF 20TH CENTURY HERITAGE

After a number of slow, if not false starts, our small group has agreed to approach the task of identifying the work in a two-fold manner. This will be our first sweep as it were.

- 1 To list all the winners of the various awards of Merit and excellence issued by the regional and national Institutes of Architecture
- 2 To compile a list of all the firms who have contributed quality works of architecture during the 20th century

1 Award winning buildings

The oldest Institute of Architecture in the country is the Cape Institute for Architecture. Established in 1899, awards of merit have been bestowed on members since 193... A number of the other Regional Institutes have a history of awards programs that go back a number of years, and of course our national institute SAIA makes Awards of Merit and Excellence.

Most of these award-winning buildings are not listed on any municipal database, many are certainly not yet 60 years old and there have been at least one instance of a fairly recent award-winning building being demolished! (The building, designed for the client PG Glass by architect and urban designer Henry Comrie, won an award of merit from the SA Institute of Architects a few years ago). Similarly many buildings have suffered from ad-hoc and ill-advised alterations that detract from the original vision of the architect, and many more simply suffer from neglect, unloved in the true sense!

In terms of listing all our architectural award winners surprisingly it has not all been plain sailing. Record keeping over the past has not been ideal and there are worrying gaps in many of the Institute records, both at national and provincial levels. As these gaps relate not only to the awards but also to the keeping of minutes and other records, this is a matter of concern to all of us.

2 Identification by firm/individual architect

The second approach has been to start identifying the architectural practices that are known to have made a contribution to work in the 20th century. This has been approached as a group exercise with members of our sub-committee proposing names based on either research work or personal knowledge. The importance of this exercise is that it is intended to remain open-ended with more and lesser-known firms and individuals being identified by colleagues as time goes on. The immediate reference group remains the heritage committees of the various institutes but once the list has been sorted and formalized it will be placed on the website where members of the Institute (as well as others) may make suggestions and proposals as to inclusions of both firms and individual architects.

Criteria for inclusion on the list has naturally been fairly intensively debated and it has been agreed to use the criteria developed by DOCOMOMO, but probably in a simplified form. Without wanting to be too ambitious in the initial stages of the project we have agreed on a one page listing sheet that should prove to be accessible and not take too long to complete. (In our experience if faced with a data sheet of daunting size many colleagues will give up and walk-away citing time pressures and the like. It is in fact, extremely difficult to pin down anyone to motivate the significance of a particular building unless there happens to be a direct threat which requires specialized submissions to the relevant authorities).

To date we have identified approximately 100 buildings that have received an award (at any or all level of adjudication) and have made good progress in the listing of firms and individual architects. Dating from....

CHALLENGES FOR OUR 20TH CENTURY HERITAGE - TWO CASE STUDIES

But what are the implications for buildings that should be retained, valued and identified on our planning authorities' database? On the ground the picture is not particularly encouraging. I would like to use just two examples to illustrate the challenges that face us in South Africa in the protection of our 20th century architectural heritage.



The Werdmuller Centre, Main Road Claremont, Cape Town. Designed by one of our leading architects, the late Roelof Uytenbogaard.

This case caused an immense furore when the proposal for demolition reached the ears of the architectural and heritage fraternity. It is to my knowledge, the only architectural issue that has enjoyed its own blog here in South Africa (<http://werdmullercentre.blogspot.com>), and calls and messages of support were received from colleagues across the globe! An electronic petition to “Save Werdmuller” was circulated and the response from architects and friends of architecture alike was astonishing. It was also one of the few instances that caught the attention of our younger colleagues who became actively and vociferously involved in stating their objection to the proposal to demolish the building. Before his death Roelof was a Professor at the University of Cape Town’s School of Architecture and served as a mentor to many generations of students now in practice.



Werdmuller Centre as it stands today, definitely unloved and displaying ad-hoc and intrusive signage for tenants on short-term leases

In the Heritage Impact Assessment¹ that was prepared for the building it is stated that “The Werdmuller Centre could be classified as significant in terms of the criteria in Section 3 of the NHRA because of the following criteria

“Its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group; Its importance in demonstrating a high creative or technical achievement at a particular period, Its strong or special association with the life or work of a person, group or organisation of importance in the history of South Africa”; Reference was also made to the criteria developed by John Rennie in the 1983 *Catalogue of Buildings of Central Cape Town*, in which buildings are identified according to a range of criteria.

These include:

Buildings or sites which are of national or local historic importance or association, Buildings which are rare or outstanding architectural examples of their period,

Buildings which contribute to or enhance the quality of a square or other space of significance on which they abut.

¹ Draft Heritage Statement: Prepared in compliance with Section 38 of the National Heritage Resources Act: December 2007. Peter de Tolly & Associates; Aikman Associates: Heritage Management; Urban Design Services cc: Heritage Management

In the opinion of the consultants the Werdmuller Centre clearly fell into several of these categories of criteria, however the assessors went on to remark that a considerable time had been spent analysing the economic viability and sustainability of the building, and the problems experienced by the owners in maintaining a successful tenant mix. It was noted that the condition of the building had become seriously degraded, due to a lack of maintenance and inappropriate tenancing (as we can see from the photograph). It was furthermore argued that the changing urban framework of Claremont and the new demands in terms of commercial and retail opportunities make the building unviable. Comparisons were drawn between Cavendish Square and the Werdmuller Centre – both developed for the same client. He also explained that a public opinion survey had been undertaken by an independent consultant. Opinions ranging from the general public to architects and other built environment professionals had been sourced. Three-quarters of the professionals and half of the community said that they knew a great deal or quite a lot about the Werdmuller Centre. **A majority of both samples felt that the Centre is neither an attractive nor a useful building!!**

In conclusion the consultants were of the opinion that although the building was of some heritage significance its inherent design faults and consequent lack of economic viability outweighed arguments for the buildings' retention.

Comments received from professional colleagues ranged from;

"Modernist buildings have by definition short lives. The cost to repair the concrete rot alone would be hard to manage. Large areas of steel have little or no cover as it was not bent to the designed curves."

"Ultimately time has proved that the building is no more than a utopian attempt to invert the traditional Shopping Mall in the name of off shutter modernism."

"In architectural heritage issues, the debate cannot be reduced to an 'I like/I don't like' level. There will always be voices on both sides. The so-called opinion survey, therefore, is methodologically absurd. It has no value whatsoever."

"We believe that it is (an important relection of the social history of South Africa) Uytenbogaardt was one of the few architects of the 1970's who were consciously seeking to combat the exclusionary policies of apartheid, which sought to remove people of colour from places of economic opportunity. A central idea behind the Werdmuller Centre was to create a 'souk' for micro-businesses between the generator of the station and the Main Road. The building was explicitly challenging the exclusionary American model of 'big box' shopping centres such as Cavendish Square".

Although I am of the opinion that the discussion that took place over the possible demolition of the Werdmuller Centre illustrated a basic shift in the manner in which the architectural profession views our contemporary heritage it does illustrate that there is a considerable divide within the ranks and that robust and open debate is a healthy way in which to understand the significance of these buildings and the strong reactions that people in general have to them. After all, if we as a profession, have such strong but divided views what can we expect of the broader public?

Since the intense debate about the future of the Werdmuller Centre there has been a rather long and deafening silence from the client and consultants alike. Informally it has been learnt that the developers have been advised by (and listened to) their professional team and that the major part of the building will be incorporated into a new development proposal that addresses the requirements of the client and the commercial area of the Claremont central business district. Although information is sketchy at present we hope that the major component of this building facing on to Main Road will be retained and restored, that

the design concept of the Centre will be respected and that the additional new accommodation will be of such a nature that it will complement both the architectural design of this exceptional building as well as ensure its sustainability long into the future. As has been understood by the remarks made with regard to the possible future successful use of a building of this nature it would seem likely that it may be necessary for the newer commercial addition to cross-subsidize the restoration and possible future management of the original 'front' portion. Interest has been indicated in utilizing the front section as a hub for creative industries – a use that could be more easily accommodated in a building of this configuration rather than a straight retail or commercial use. Possibly the current downturn in the global economy will benefit the redevelopment process by slowing it down and permitting all parties involved to think more creatively about how the building can operate in the future and the role that it can play as a landmark in the commercial hub of one of Cape Town's most affluent and successful suburbs.

DURBAN: THE NEDBANK BUILDING, A CASE OF ARCHITECTURE MISUNDERSTOOD?

The second example, upon which I can touch upon only briefly, is that of the Netherlands Bank Building, in Anton Lebede Street (formerly Smith Street) in Durban. Designed and built in 1964/65 by one of South Africa's leading architects of the period, Norman Eaton, this came to our attention a few weeks before the completion of this paper and so the outcome of the emergency demonstration and submission for protection to the authorities is unknown. In the motivation put together for the protection of the building the author states that it is considered to be one of his (Eaton's) most important works the Nedbank building which demonstrates a unique approach to construction and technology within the South African context.



303 ANTON LEMBEDE STREET (Former Smith Street)

Architect Norman Eaton

In my power point presentation I will show photographs that illustrate the immediate and urgent response by colleagues in Durban to what appeared to be the demolition of the very beautiful *brise-soleil* which is an integral part of the design of the building. What I learnt later through a conversation with a colleague, Professor Walter Peters, was that originally the context within which the building was situated was substantially different to what it is now, surrounded by high-rise buildings as may be seen in the photographs.

At the time of the construction the *brise-soleil* formed a very important function of filtering the east light along the façade of the building. With the deep shadows caused by the surrounding buildings sun is no longer an issue and in fact the current owner was so desperate to have additional light in his building that

he thought the insertion of a window or two might cheer up his office! Hence the removal of part of the screen to accommodate the window; a case not so much of unloved as misunderstood perhaps? The challenge remains for this as well as other modern movement buildings that are no longer situated within their original context. How does one accommodate changing needs, be they in terms of use or a response to environmental or other factors. It is suggested that there may possibly be various approaches that could be adopted when considering this, which brings me back to the listing and identification process which I have referred to earlier in this paper.

There is an urgent need to identify the most significant modern movement and contemporary buildings in South Africa. An integral part of the listing process must include a brief statement of significance and a possible grading – which should adhere to the national grading for heritage resources as set out in our legislation. As with any other heritage resources the grading (Grades I, II and III) will inform us on how we should approach changes to these buildings. Should the Nedbank Building be considered as a Grade II, and given the statement of significance that will no doubt refer to the *brise-soleil* there could well be an argument for a limited intervention in the element to permit a positive environmental change (natural light). However without the information it is impossible to take an informed decision as to how much intervention, if any, is permissible.

IN CONCLUSION

So, in South Africa, as in many countries, we have the challenges of un-loved, misunderstood modern buildings under threat from a public including developers and authorities, that are of the persuasion that they are ugly, impractical and no longer serve the purpose for which they were intended. The heritage legislation, if amended to include this category of building, would provide the necessary protection for this valuable architectural heritage. As we all know, amendments to legislation are not easy, however a legislative review process is currently underway, and if we as architects and heritage professionals are serious about keeping these very special buildings we need to lobby government with an articulate and well reasoned argument as to the value of this heritage. This will not be an easy task given the many wide-ranging demands placed upon our heritage legislation generally but with the help of our international colleagues and influential organisations such as the UIA, ICOMOS and Docomomo we must be able to make a convincing argument.

I hope that, in this paper where I have set out the issues and concerns that we face in South Africa, many of which are shared by you here, I have also managed to indicate that there is a way that we are addressing these challenges. The steps may be small but they are incremental, and the opinion of colleagues and the public is slowly changing. We have to keep publicizing the value that we place on buildings of the modern movement and beyond and we are pleased and encouraged that conferences such as this offer us all a platform to share experiences and hear new ideas on our (Un)Loved Modern inheritance!