



VASSA Bulletin 6: 29 Oct 2009

To subscribe email: markbowen@xsinet.co.za

Welcome to the sixth edition of the Vernacular Architecture Society's regular online bulletin

Hello everyone I hope that you are all well and coping with a year that seems to be accelerating towards the end!

On the personal front: the news is official, my wife and I are going to the UK for a couple of years on a work transfer through Kim's company. We'll be based in London and I'm looking forward to some vernacking English style and also some volunteer work on a couple of archaeological sites if I'm lucky to be accepted. We're keeping our local properties as this is only temporary and we'll need to come back to SA with it's beautiful people and sunshine

Upcoming outing On Saturday 31 October we will be visiting Klein Zoar in the Brooklyn area in Cape Town. This is the house where folk hero Wolraad Woltemade is reputed to have lived. Jos Baker's book, 'Preserving a House', will be available for a special price of R220.00. Meeting time 10.00 for 10.15. Members only, please see the monthly newsletter for full details. A picnic lunch will be held on the lawn, **remember your sunscreen, beach umbrellas and folding chairs.** (bikinis and Speedos optional!)

Report back on last talk We had a fantastic crowd of over 70 people to see **John Kramer's** presentation "The Fleeting Moment", at our last monthly meeting. John showed us a beautiful computerized "slideshow" of photos that he took in the 1970's of the corner shops and other buildings that were found in the towns surrounding Cape Town and also those further afield.

Report back on last outing What can I say about the Prince Albert weekend? According to the wonderful feedback that I have received from participants it was a real winner and Pat managed to make the trip fees go a very long way in respect of all that was accomplished.

"We would like to give a BIG ROUND OF APPLAUSE to Pat and John Kramer for all the effort they put into our recent trip to Prince Albert. It was a resounding success and they packed every moment with intriguing finds of many kinds. The able commentaries by Judy Macquire were fascinating. Managing to feed and water us all on the trip monies was a miracle in itself. WELL DONE to them all. THANK YOU AGAIN!

Clive and Jeanne Bull"

NEW MEMBERS INFO

If you are a new member and you're looking for a wonderful introduction to the fine art of Vernacking then please buy yourself a copy of "**Places at the Cape. A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers**" by **Carohn Cornell and Antonia Malan**. I bought a copy at the last meeting for R100 and have found it fascinating, it really is a useful guide for finding the answers to the questions that you've be dying to ask. Carohn and Antonia have both attained legendary status within their fields, so you just can't go wrong! Due to its popularity, a reprint has been ordered, so there will be plenty of copies available.

Readers contributions Please feel free to let me have any material that you would like to share with other members. This may be something that you read or a heritage issue that you believe should be brought to the attention of other readers. It could also be a summary of a research project that you may have done. You may even have a theory that has been rattling around for awhile that you'd like to put forward – this is not the official journal so contributions don't need to be nearly as polished.

Round vs rectangular building traditions. I'm fascinated by the vernacular architecture that is to be found around the world and there are strong tendencies for population groups to either favour rectangular houses or round houses. It appears that people of European descent tend to have preferred to stick with the rectangular shapes of their home countries, whilst many of the indigenous populations that they encountered, had a preference for the round floor plan. James Walton mentioned in his book "African Village", that it was initially difficult for the African home builders to build rectangular houses with their right angled corners, as their tribes had been building in the round tradition for generations. This must also go for the European colonists who had always lived in and built rectangular houses. I know for a fact that if I was asked to build a house, I would feel a lot more comfortable and confident building a house with right angles and straightish walls than trying to build something round. In his book, Dr Walton describes the building of a Xhosa beehive type hut which is also similar to the Sotho style. It consists of a number of upright saplings planted in the ground in a circle, hoops of horizontal saplings were then tied to the uprights at regular intervals up to a height of 6 to 7 ft. The remaining unbound ends of the upright saplings were then bent to meet at the apex where they were bound together. Further hoops were added to complete the skeleton before thatching with a reedy variety of grass. (Dr Walton's narrative is far more thorough). After reading this description I got to thinking whether or not this technology could be used in the construction of rectangular type houses and I remembered seeing an interesting drawing in Dr Walton's book, 'Homesteads and Villages of South Africa'. Sure as nuts there was my house! A drawing with the title 'Kapsteilhuis, Platberg, Orange Free State', showing a rectangular house with thatching from top to bottom with the 'gabled' ends slightly rounded. The fact that it was in the Free State makes it possible that the pioneer farmer that built it may have had some sort of exposure to the beehive building tradition and materials of the Sotho people. It is interesting to note that in the book 'New History of South Africa' by Hermann Giliomee and Bernard Mbenga, they show reproductions of drawings by R.H. Dingley (1819) and Charles Bell (mid 1800's), showing trekboer houses. Both are rectangular and thatched to the ground, but Dingley's appears to be a Kapsteilhuis whilst Bell's is a more advanced looking Hardbeshuis. I guess what I'm trying to say is that no matter what technologies and building material you're exposed to, you are more than likely going to follow your instincts and build the same basic shape of building that your ancestors lived in. If this line of thinking is followed then the building of round corbelled buildings in our Karoo area by the trekboers seems even more curious! As a matter of interest, I came across a couple of websites showing the splitting images of the Slingersfontein corbelled building which appears on the cover of our December 2008 VASSA Journal. Both Slingersfontein and the images in the websites show three courses of projecting stone and a bullet shaped building. The odd thing is that these other buildings are in Syria and built from mud brick! Does anyone know of any Syrian sailors or slaves that may have reached our shores???Mark Bowen

DIY member outings This section of the bulletin has the potential to be great fun! The idea is for members or interested parties who are keen to do related but not official outings to meet up with others who have similar interests. As I say, as long as it's in our wider field of interest I'm sure many of our members will be interested and would be delighted to share knowledge and experience with others, and also to learn from others.

Interesting websites It's amazing what interesting sites you can come across by Googling the words "Vernacular architecture", wow, some people live in strange buildings!

See www.shelterpub.com/.../WH_p14-17.html where they show the pages from the book "Wonderful Houses around the World"

Great Books With the festive season fast approaching please remember that if you're looking for presents for your loved ones to buy you, then look no further! I know a number of architecture and Cape fans who will be receiving books penned by our champion of Cape Heritage, **Dr Hans Fransen**. His books are beautiful and can be bought directly from him or from many book shops. Obviously directly from Hans means that you get to say that you've met the author, which gives you great street cred amongst your friends. Drop him a note on fransen@telkomsa.net

I'm particularly fond of my copies of "**Old Towns and Villages of the Cape**", and "**A Cape Camera**". These along with my copy of "**Places at the Cape**" will be joining me on my venture to London. I've got to have something worthwhile to get stuck into when that winter weather sets in!

Book Launch !!!! Well known and long standing member, Helen Binckes, will be launching her new book 'OHMS' which is an illustrated essay on the poppy as symbol to commemorate the fallen of World War 1. To be introduced by Professor Bill Nasson at the UCT Irma Stern Museum, Cecil Road, Rosebank on Remembrance Saturday 7th November 2009 at 10h30. Then to view the SS *Mendi* memorial by the artist Madi Phala (1955-2007) situated in Cecil Road, (300 metres from the Museum.) Refreshments to be served on the verandah. This is very exciting as I know that Helen has put a lot of work and love into this book and I'm sure many members have been waiting for this moment!

Member's research please let us know of any research work that you may be doing. By knowing what is being researched we will be able to see where members' interests overlap with others and possibly where there are gaps in the field for new research projects to be initiated.

Talks by other societies and clubs that may be of interest Here we note anything that comes to our attention that may be of interest to our members.

- **Cape Natural History Club talks**

- Thursday 26 November 2009 – Geological catastrophes**

"Saranne Cessford asks us what we might think of as a geological catastrophe which could have affected our planet over its existence of 4.6 billion years. With our information, Saranne will then describe the effects of these and other catastrophes that have assailed our planet and yet – through it all – diverse forms of life have survived in what is often a hostile environment. Hear about the geological history of our wonderful Earth, which will certainly add to your knowledge. Saranne will look at what might constitute a "catastrophe" in geology, how such catastrophes might manifest in the rock record and what is meant by the modern "Uniformitarian" thinking on geology! Examples cover earthquakes, volcanoes, ice ages, mud volcanoes, tsunamis, asteroid impacts, etc., which are clearly illustrated to assist our understanding of these events."

In case of queries contact Eleanor: **Telephone** 021 762 1779 or see their website www.capenaturalhistoryclub.co.za

All meetings are held in the lecture theatre at SACS, entrance from Main Street, Newlands, at 8 pm R20.00 for visitors

- **Exhibition: Glimpses into the Past – works by Charles Bell (1813-1882) and Solomon Caesar Malan (1812-1894)**

Venue: Sasol Art Museum, 52 Ryneveld Street, Stellenbosch

Date: 5 November 2009 – 30 January 2009 **Opening:** 4 November 2009 at 18:30

Museum Hours: Mondays 10:-16.30; Tuesday to Saturday 09:00 – 16:30

As part of a collaborative initiative between UCT and Stellenbosch University the artworks of **Charles Davidson Bell** (1813-1882) and **Solomon Caesar Malan** (1812-1894) are exhibited together for the first time as a comparative visual perspective on Cape Town and its environs circa 1830 -1870. (from a vernac point of view, this is going to be fascinating as Charles Bell did a fantastic job of recording the early Cape, unfortunately I don't know Mr Malan's work) Our very own **Mary Van Blommestein** of Irma Stern fame, has been invited to co-curate this prestigious exhibition. Drop me an e-mail if you want the full press release.

- **Exhibition:** Our very talented and fascinating member, **Veronica Wilkinson**, is at it again! She will be staging the exhibition '*Difference*' at the Alliance Francaise from 16th November to 8th Dec. Please watch the press for more details and the next bulletin too. Rumour has it that it's going to be really interesting.
- **Exhibition:** Well known architect and watercolourist, **Paul Andrew** will be staging a group exhibition with Sheena Ridley, Pierre Volschenk and others from 30 October until 15 November 2009 at the Oudebrug Gallery, Oudebrug Road – off N2, opposite the Orchard Farmstall, Grabouw. The exhibition opening is at 18.30 on 30 Oct. Contact 021 859 2595 or 083 589 2881 www.ridley.co.za

Trivia department

Did you know that some Iron Age societies in Southern Africa dug storage pits to store their grain and then smeared the inside with cattle dung and sealed them with stones. The methane gas from the dung killed the insects and allowed the grain to be stored for several years if kept dry. In more recent years the pits were dug within the cattle kraal. (Handbook to the Iron Age. The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Framing Societies in Southern Africa. Thomas N. Huffman). This serves as yet another reminder that the sophistication and technology of past peoples should never be underestimated!

In a book by Jose Burman, "Towards the far Horizon. The story of the Ox-wagon in South Africa", I came across a wonderful picture by adventurer Francois le Vaillant, who traveled in the country in the late 1700's. In this painting he depicts a number of dwellings including his wagon, his tall tent, three matjieshuisies, two brick farm buildings and what looks like three thatched beehive type huts. What is really the funniest thing about this painting, "Slaber's farm", is the little figure in European dress urinating against the wall of the brick farmhouse! Who would have guessed that the French had such a wicked sense of humour?

With the hullabaloo over the naming of the new Greenpoint stadium i thought that this may be of interest:

The first recorded ancient Olympic Games were held in 776 BCE with only one event - the stade. The stade was a unit of measurement (about 600 feet) that also became the name of the footrace because it was the distance run. Since the track for the stade (race) was a stade (length), the location of the race became the stadium. From Olympic Facts By [Jennifer Rosenberg](#), About.com

Constructive thoughts on this bulletin will be welcome, please bear in mind that I don't want to turn this into my full time job so I need to keep it simple. Please enter into all correspondence via e-mail to this address ie markbowen@xsinet.co.za

Thanks for your time and keep exploring the wonderful world of Vernacular Architecture and the people who built it.

Best regards

Mark Bowen

Secretary for the Vernacular Architecture Society

Should you wish to **unsubscribe**, please send me a blank e-mail with the **word unsubscribe in the subject box**

News, News, News Please read this.....

CULTURAL HISTORY AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

“It is of the utmost importance that the public take note of the fact that the University of Stellenbosch has stopped the presentation of Cultural History as a division of the History Department, as from 1 April 2009. The reason for this drastic step could ‘til this very day not be supplied by the university, in spite of continuous requests for clarification. The independent department of Cultural history was closed in 1998, but the subject has been offered at a post graduate level for the past ten years as part of the Department of History.

There was no run up to this enormous decision; no consultation with the relevant staff, no discussions. The announcement came out of the blue as a given. Although well-argued motivations for the retaining of the discipline were submitted to the management of the university, with focus on the need for cultural historians in the field of conservation in South Africa and on the uniqueness of the specific offer of this discipline at Stellenbosch, it was of no avail. There was not even the courtesy of a response to that document. It appears that the University of Stellenbosch is not even aware of what they are losing, and to what extent they boycott conservation and cultural relationships in South Africa.

The specific programmes that this division of the History Department offered were quite unique. Cultural Historians were trained here to approach culture and heritage in a holistic way; to make a thorough study of the theories of Cultural History, but then in addition to apply those theories to the practice. They were also taught the importance of the relationship between material and intangible culture, between patrician and folk culture, and between traditional and modern day culture, and that no part of culture can be studied in isolation. It was the only academic department in South Africa that gave proper training in styles – the history of styles and style identification, as applied especially to architecture and furniture. It was also one of the very few that gave proper academic training in oral history and especially oral traditions and the methodology of this sub-discipline.

The post graduate programme in Cultural History was very popular and had even more MA and doctoral students than History itself.”

Dr Mathilda Burden

University Museum, University of Stellenbosch

Dr Hans Franssen received his Honorary Doctorate through this department and wrote two letters to Die Burger to express his dismay at its closure by the university, but neither letter was printed! (and Dr Franssen is well known to the newspapers readers).

Mathilda will be our speaker in September and I believe that it’s our duty to spread the above message to as many people as possible because surely this is taking a big step backwards in this era of cultural awareness?

Interesting newspaper articles

Please cut out any articles, letters or notices regarding the Vernacs that you come across in the newspapers. We want to start a scrap book to keep track of any publicity that we may get. If you can hand them to me at meetings or outings I’d really appreciate it. Don’t worry about duplicating, we’d rather have extra copies than miss anything. Thank you.

Member’s research(new) This section allows members to let others know what work is being done out there. By knowing what is being researched we will be able to see where members’ interests overlap with others and possibly where there are gaps in the field for new research projects to be initiated.

Helen Binckes: “I’m doing research for a Masters at UCT on the contextualization of World War One memorials in Cape Town and around – not truly vernac but if anyone comes across any grave or memorial in their vernacscratching in places near and far I would be pleased to know of their existence. For example: Sam McClennan via Maureen Archer has given me a most interesting photograph which is in the church at Stanford, which is linked to my researches about the Stone of Remembrance at UCT.” bihelene@gmail.com

Kathy Dumbrell: “I’m starting work on a hybrid family history/novel/working class history. The premise of what I’m heading towards in this project is a history presented in “story” form, rather like Dan Sleight’s *Eilande* or *Vatmaar*. My family lived in a rented house - 295 Lower Main Rd, Observatory - opposite the Bijou Cinema from about 1905 to 1956 and I’d like to trace the stories that brought the family to that house. My great-grandfather arrived in (we think) the Eastern Cape in about the 1850s from the UK and seemed to have worked his way west to the Cape, marrying and having a family en route (whose existence I only learned of in his death notice - they died before he married my great-grandmother in 1902) and ended up working at the Salt River Works until he retired in about 1905. My great grandmother’s family were German and French in origin and her life before marriage was in a quite different social class to that of her husband. So, the potential exists to weave together quite diverse histories. If nobody else enjoys it, at least my cousins will - they’re fascinated but not historians so I want the story to read easily for them - hence the modelling on *Eilande* and *Vatmaar*. If anyone has images of the area in that early C20th period or their own family stories/ other anecdotes, I’d love to hear them.” dumbrell@gmail.com

Talks by other societies and clubs that may be of interest Here we note anything that comes to our attention that may be of interest to our members.

Irma Stern Museum I’m a huge fan of ceramics and this exhibition sounds wonderful!

An exhibition of studio ceramics will be held at the UCT Irma Stern Museum from 9-29 August. Titled “*Potters 4 Function*” this group show features the work of Barbara Bruce, Christo Giles, John Newdigate and Sarah Walters. High fired stoneware and porcelain are used to create distinctive and functional pieces which are original and beautiful when in use or display. European, Oriental and African traditions merge in these unique contemporary ceramics.

The UCT Irma Stern Museum, situated in Cecil Road, Rosebank, is open Tue-Sat from 10h00-17h00. Ph: 021 685 5686 for further details.

Members news This is where we learn a little about our members and their activities.

Vernac member **Ilze Wolff’s** company, OPEN HOUSE ARCHITECTURE, presents OH8 – Fagan Monograph I, the first of two tours focusing on the work of Gabriël Fagan Architects. It is a tour guided by husband and wife team **Gawie and Gwen Fagan** showing examples of their work over the past 45 plus years. Gabriël Fagan Architects are well known for designing buildings that are rooted in the local context, displays a sensuality in the craftsmanship and detailing, and that tell particular stories of our country and themselves.

Date 5 September 2009 cost R220.00 each. The tour includes: House Raynham, Newlands; UCT Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine, Observatory; Chavonnes Battery Museum, V&A Waterfront; Die Es, Camps Bay. Numbers are limited and cost excludes transport.

For queries contact Ilze on t 021 447 4182 c 072 448 0848 tours@oharchitecture.com
www.oharchitecture.com

Members question and answer section This is for members who have a lot of questions to ask and for people to share their hard earned knowledge.

Q2: I’ve seen mention numerous times of **dovecotes** existing on the estates in and around the Cape but I don’t recall reading anything about the pigeons that these housed and the uses to which they were put. I’m assuming that the beasties were used for culinary purposes but maybe we had pigeon racing in the early Cape or even carrier pigeons delivering messages? (my money is on the “pigeon

pie” theory but it would be great to get an authentic recipe to prove it!). Were these birds brought over from the Netherlands as I’m pretty sure that they didn’t use our indigenous dove species? This is possibly more a question for our cultural historians than for our architects!

Constructive thoughts on this bulletin will be welcome. Please enter into all correspondence via e-mail to this address ie markbowen@xsinet.co.za .

Best regards

Mark Bowen

Secretary for the Vernacular Architecture Society

Should you wish to **unsubscribe**, please send me a blank e-mail with the **word unsubscribe in the subject box**