VASSA Journal

Number 9  June 2003

Editor: Stewart Harris. Series editor: Antonia Malan.

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Capture the moment! That was the thought that came up at the gathering held to remember Dirk Visser, who died 1 January 2003, aged 72 years. A flood of memories and appreciation was released at his Wake, collected together with some additional material in this issue of the *VASSA Journal*. There is a fruitful opportunity for a more thoughtful and methodical appreciation of his work – it would make a fine ‘coffee table’ book with illustrations of his buildings – but the present purpose is much more limited.

Hospitality, long lunches, sparky discussion, fun, learning. That is the atmosphere that comes first to mind. Jean Visser and Dirk at a gathering meant enjoyment.

Dirk wrote little – only two pieces are known, one of them reproduced as the opening essay. It was written in 1965 by Mike Munnik and Dirk, and is a kind of vision statement for their growing architectural practice – the new Cape vernacular house (clipped eaves, white walls often of bagged brick) that they helped become the defining domestic style of the late 20th century. (With Ronald Lewcock, Dirk also wrote a study of the artist Le Vaillant’s architectural drawings, not suitable for reproduction here.)

In 1999 VASSA organised a workshop, *Understanding and recording Cape Vernacular Architecture*. Dirk gave a slide show and talked about how old Cape buildings were constructed, and reflected on some aspects of restoration. An edited transcript is the concluding essay.

Sandwiched between Dirk’s own words are contributions in which some aspects of the man are traced - architect of note, building materials expert, Cape architectural and social historian, activist on heritage issues, friend, irritant, mentor, *bon vivant* ...

Thanks Dirk. Thanks Jean.

Stewart Harris
31 January 2003

*The Editor is a Heritage Consultant and former Chair of VASSA, The Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa. Thanks to Joanna Marx, Antonia Malan and Jean Visser for proofreading.*
THE MODERN CAPE HOUSE

Mike Munnik and Dirk Visser

This article, titled ‘The House’, appeared in a special Cape issue of the South African Architectural Record in June 1965.

A universal situation

That the house is the Englishman’s castle is as true today as before, and that the idea is shared by most western societies seems equally true. The ideal of personal success, as estate agents keep reminding us, is reflected in the comfortable family house, situated in large, well tended and secluded grounds.

In communities of expanding population and limited land, this ideal presents a considerable problem and the pattern of endless low density suburban sprawl is familiar to any observer of Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town. The feeling of a lack of human scale and indifference to other than the barest physical needs of community is as evident in the housing of the lower and middle as in the higher income groups.

The large or small detached house on its own plot surrounded by little scraps of garden gives rise to an environment devoid of the vitality of which any community is capable. It is particularly noticeable in the new Coloured and Bantu townships where people are being moved from old densely populated areas with narrow streets to sprawling housing schemes which conform to statutory housing standards based on a combination of health, legal and financial requirements. The middle and higher income group areas are equally without distinction, being dreary and mechanical repetitions of the same size plot and standard road width with only the superficial trimmings of a raked window head or varnished close-boarded gable to differentiate between the houses.

At the moment, the architect in the private or public sector plays little or no part in the shaping of a good residential environment. For an architect to carry out private house commissions is often frustrating and uneconomic, requiring a disproportional amount of organization. The house is said frequently to cost more and take longer to build. With no assurance that the adjoining building will in any way respect its existence, any environmental continuity is left entirely to the gardening skill of the owners, who it is hoped will plant as much as possible to ‘soften the buildings’. Many architects, tired of dealing with difficult wives of clients and the few builders who are still left in the house-building-under-contract business, have surrendered the field to the large speculative builder. These provide the complete service of finance, design and supply. Indications from America are that these organizations will continue to grow larger and more powerful, equaling the giants of the motor industry. The status symbols of custom-built as opposed to ex-stock with all the problems of ‘packaged taste’ are already part of the American way of life and recognisable certainly in Johannesburg if not quite to the same extent in Cape Town.

It may be argued that this pattern is the natural expression of the democratic idea. After all, in England the ‘bungalow’ on a half acre freehold stand is the thing
promising young executives strive for in spite of the fine tradition in terraced housing and the more recent well-planned housing complexes. Certainly no one dreams of having a car designed and built, and when one adds Lord Holford’s statement that ‘by the end of this century man would have to build more houses than the total number of houses ever built before by man’, it seems that the field of mechanised house building and organization, particularly on this continent, is where the bright new technocrat architect is going to find his niche.

A glimmer of hope

In attempting to find technical solutions to problems such as housing, fundamental values and performance standards, both tangible and particularly intangible, are overlooked. Cape Town is fortunate in having on hand highly successful examples of traditional houses and groups of houses which emphasise these values and reflect an enviable way of life.

The materials available to the 18th century Cape owner-builder and the limited performance of these materials coupled to the fortuitous availability of good artisans produced such fine environments as the Malay Quarter in Cape Town. Yellowwood beams came in relatively short lengths limiting the width of the buildings. The soft bricks required the waterproofing qualities of plaster and limewash and the ‘South Easter’ demanded that the exposed ends of bundles of thatch be sheltered by an end gable. These are part of a true functional tradition.

The siting of the house and the subsidiary buildings, often at right angles to one another to form a place or area of arrival at the end of the long journey, and the planting of oak trees around this place to shade tired horses, contribute to the very human setting of the Cape farm complex of buildings.

This concern for the human being and a fundamental respect and awe for the beauty of the natural surroundings made it possible to achieve a harmony between building and their surroundings right up until the end of the 19th century.

The purpose of providing an agreeable place for people to live in was the main aim and object, and technical inventiveness was harnessed to this end.

A regional domestic style

To invest the modern house with some of the regional architectural qualities of the Cape has occupied the minds of a number of architects. Sir Herbert Baker, of course, at the beginning of the [20th] century drew attention to the quality of Cape buildings, emphasising particular aspects. This was later to degenerate in lesser hands to the indiscriminate application of the ‘Cape Dutch Gable’ and linenfold detailing to everything from small suburban houses, barely able to carry the weight of their overpowering gables, to railway stations, post offices and electrical sub-stations.

Of late a re-appraisal of the qualities of the humbler folk buildings as opposed to the manor house, and particularly of buildings of the late 18th century and 19th century Cape Georgian buildings, has been made by architects.

It is the simplicity of their form, usually a rectangle with a simple pitched roof and clipped eaves, inevitably painted white, which seems to fit so honestly the purpose for which they were built. Shutters and not eaves shade the windows from the hot sun.
and the quality of interior light achieved by the restricted use of windows contributes much to the quality of the interiors. The grouping of these buildings usually results in the spaces between being meaningful. What undoubtedly appeals to the modern architect, being endlessly bombarded by gimmicky new materials and ever rising costs, is the unpretentiousness and unifying effect of whitewash, and the simplicity and economy of the structure.

In 1952 Revel Fox, fresh from a two year stay in Stockholm, started a practice in Worcester and was the first to see the similarity between the simple Western Province farm building and the then current well-detailed Swedish one-family house. In developing the themes of the louvred shutter, the clipped eaves, the chimney (bakoondo) as a sculptural element, and the quality of shadow on white walls, Fox produced a number of houses of unquestionable merit. In the stylistic hotchpotch of the average township, these houses stood out strongly as uncomplicated and sincere solutions to a problem.

A student, and later teacher, at the Bauhaus, Pius Pahl, practising at Stellenbosch, has been responsible for some of the most successful though uncompromising houses at the Cape. These houses are interesting in form, consistent in detailing, economic in construction, and above all essentially human in scale and character. Lovingly tended gardens, the results of a climate which encourages the growth of colourful creepers and shrubs, provide the perfect setting. Dalsig, a suburb of Stellenbosch, with its grass pavements, trees and continuity, achieved through a certain architectural consistency, hints at the possibilities of a solution to the problem of suburban environment.

The houses of Fox and Pahl, together with those of many young architects sympathetic to their ideas, are sufficiently consistent in approach to be recognizable as a Regional Style. The characteristics of the style being the use of white throughout, the predominance of wall over window, the simplicity of form and, through the clipping of eaves, the accenting of the prismatic quality of the roof as part of the walls. But while these are the recognisable physical elements, they are born of a desire to express some historical continuity, to build simply and in an uncomplicated way and to a certain degree to protest against the current tendency of wilful and meaningless design. In their pure form, the interiors, with their raw brick or tile floors, roughly plastered with-washed walls and untreated pine ceilings, have a starkness and strength akin to ‘brutalism’ except that in the Mediterranean sunlight and profusion of flaming bougainvillea the ‘kitchen sink’ aspect of ‘brutalism’ is overwhelmed by charm, for better or perhaps for worse.

The demands of modern living have expressed themselves to a certain extent in the plans. The tendency to reduce the size of children’s bedrooms to a minimum to allow for the addition of a children’s living room related to a centrally positioned kitchen, is common. Many middle income group Cape houses are run without maids and this allows for more open planning. For those households with permanent maids, the maid’s rooms and bathroom are usually planned as part of the house with interleading doors for possible later conversion into a guest room or to enable the maid to baby sit without having to sit up. It is probably only this variation which distinguishes the Cape plan from its up-country counterpart, as, like most small houses throughout the world, the arrangement and relationship of the rooms one to another, is similar. Great stress is made of links with the garden, and the private swimming pool,
once the status symbol of the rich only, is rapidly becoming the focus of many more gardens.

Having recognised the emergence of a possible regional style among some architects, motivated by a desire to humanise an environment largely dominated by materialistic values, it is interesting to note the same desire among non-architects, giving rise to a positive development and an indication of the change in attitude which has come about.

Labourer’s cottages, often in old and in depressed areas, but situated near schools, in Wynberg, Newlands and Rondebosch, have been bought at considerable cost and restored at often greater cost. The properties are much sought after for many reasons, but the principal one being that they have the particular quality of the unexpected, not found in the average block of flats or ‘brick under tile villa’ on its 100’x100’ plot. Their age, together with the quirks of old sub-divisions, provide the eccentricities of party walls, enclosed gardens, narrow lanes and the grouping of buildings which modern township regulations would not permit.

A much higher density is achieved and buildings which would probably be condemned by enthusiastic health inspectors, have been restored to very desirable cottages. Many of the plots in the Newlands area are around 2,400 sq ft. When restored, the gardens are entirely walled-in with no side spaces.

Jack Barnett [writing of District Six] says that ‘Hanover Street with its run-down buildings shows more vitality and urban panache in a hundred yards than the Heerengracht in its entire breadth and length’. Planners and particularly local authorities might well ponder this statement with regard to the lifeless standard township layouts of both high and low income groups, as compared to the spontaneous environment of these Quarters. Admittedly the shape and form of these areas are happy accidents and brought about by freak circumstances, but the values which they express should be taken account of.

From a purely architectural point of view it is unfortunate that many of these cottages have been insensitively restored and spoilt by meaningless decoration. Precast cement motives such as urns, cornices and other fashion magazine confectionery, undermine their principal quality of simplicity. Nevertheless, the lessons of an essentially human environment are there to be learnt.

Terrace houses

The qualities of proximity and surprise of the restored cottage have to a certain extent been carried over to some new maisonette projects where the developers are far-seeing enough to permit a comprehensive approach to design. Not only the living units but also subsidiary buildings and landscaping have been designed with reasonable results.

The tendency for large scale development to be done by substantial and responsible finance institutions, as opposed to the purely speculative investors, is heartening, and San Martini Gardens, situated in the heart of the city, is an example. This large complex of flats with gardens, launderettes, restaurant and swimming pool has attracted many people back into the city. It is an important development in checking the flight of the population into the suburbs, leaving a lifeless shell behind at 5 o’clock. Another example is the large complex of flats shortly to be built in Newlands [Montebello, Dean Street].
Although the unaffected Regional Style house, the restored cottages and some of the new developments are isolated examples, the result of special circumstances, it is to be hoped that in time the ideas contained in them will be realised by those authorities responsible for the enormous bulk of domestic buildings of the future, and that the day will come when the names of Bonteheuwel, Guguletu or Meadowridge will no longer conjure up the image of endlessly repetitive soullessness known today as ‘Economic’ and ‘Sub-Economic’ housing.

Dirk Visser at Simonsvlei in about 1993. [Photograph David van den Heever]
DIRK VAN VELDEN VISser: PARTNER AND FRIEND

Mike Munnik

The author was a founder and is a retired partner of the architectural practice Munnik, Visser, Black, Fish and Partners. This tribute was paid at Dirk Visser’s Wake on 9 January 2003.

Dirk was no ordinary man.

I would like to explain this by telling you something of our partnership and the work we did together.

I first met Dirk in January 1948 standing in the queue to register at the School of Architecture UCT, which at that time consisted of wooden huts at the south end of the university playing field. We had matriculated a month before aged 17 and there being no national service at that time we were able to enter the university.

We both had rural beginnings and later suburban schooling. There had been no architects or artists in either of our families, so we arrived at the university pretty ‘nat agter die ore’ (wet behind the ears). However we were introduced to the wonders of art and architecture, in the most wonderful way by our Professor, Thornton White, who broadened our horizons and the wisdom of the ‘art of living’. Besides architecture we learned about food, wine, music, books, paintings, the theatre and nature. It was a wonderful time for us and we loved it. Dirk soon developed an interest in the history of architecture and had a phenomenal photographic memory which could absorb information a page at a time.

The measuring and preparation of rendered drawings of historic building was a requirement which most students did not take that seriously, but Dirk and a group of friends measured Babylonstoren the Louw’s famous farm at Simondium (part of Dirk’s family) and produced a memorable set of drawings.

It was at this time that we were first employed. Louis Karol was very busy with his thesis and hadn’t time to attend to his practice. He employed us to knock out two blocks of flats in the short vacation and we would catch the train to False Bay station to spend the day working in his late parents’ house. Our remuneration was £20 each, a welcome sum at that time.

Our university days were happy and although we were serious and worked hard, it was more like meaningful play. Graduation was followed by work overseas mainly in London. Carefree days full of energy absorbing everything to do with architecture and architects. We took to the zany humour of the Goons – Peter Sellars, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe – and Dirk’s mimicking the famous Eccles and Min became legendary.

We visited all the Corbusier icons, the Salvation Army building in Paris, the chapel at Ronchamp as well as the famous Villa Savoye in ruins at that time, and the Unite Habitation in Marseilles, but we were more drawn to the work of Alvar Aalto and the Scandinavians, who somehow, while working in uncompromising contemporary language, managed to express a timeless quality and a sense of historical continuity in
craftsmanship and materials. This sense of quality made a deep impression and remained with Dirk in all his work.

We returned to Cape Town and joined the staff at the School of Architecture as assistant studio masters and started practising as Munnik and Visser in one small room in the Advertising Centre above Riebeeck Square. Later we were joined by Arthur Black, Hirsch Fish and Mo Sharfman and a younger generation of partners. The practice developed with Dirk assisting Professor Pryce Lewis with the large Physics and Oceanography Building at UCT. By this time his interest and knowledge of architectural history had deepened and he undertook many restoration projects. He played an important role in the Simon van der Stel Foundation and the formation of the Vernacular Architecture Society and on outings attracted a large following of devoted lady members who hung on his every word!

Anton Rupert created Historic Homes, a company devoted to the restoration of historic buildings in the *platteland* towns and, among others, Dirk did the major restoration of the Drostdy at Graaff-Reinet and other significant buildings in Stellenbosch.

His work was recognized by the prestigious Wetenskap en Kunse Foundation from whom he received an Award which we celebrated on the occasion in true style in Stellenbosch. The addition of the Planetarium to the existing SA Museum in the Gardens is one of Dirk’s finest works. The resolution of their formal relationship and the siting of the domed structure at the corner of Queen Victoria Street and Grey’s Pass is masterly.

After a stint in Zambia assisting Julian Elliott with his great task of the University of Zambia, he led our team which won the competition for the Paarl Civic Centre. The design of the Council chamber was a masterpiece for which beautiful tapestries were woven by Gunnel Hicks’s mother.

Dirk served on the Heritage Committee of the Cape Institute of Architects for many years and was widely consulted by architects and other authorities in matters of restoration.

He had a deep feeling for the Cape and Cape Town which we all shared. Church Street, starting at St George’s Street with the *Cape Times* and *Argus* buildings, the Kunskamer, the Café Royal (the scene of many convivial evenings with journalists, artists and others), further up Church Street the antique dealers Ashbey’s Galleries, and Mr Viveros, the booksellers in Long Street - these were the places and people Dirk loved.

Dirk became an authority and major collector of Cape furniture as well as china and paintings. When he was restoring Sotheby’s building in Hout Street, producing beautiful working drawings on his favourite ‘detail paper’ in pencil, he was at his happiest. The front door has elaborate pilasters with mouldings and capitals with garlands and swags which he drew full size. He took me in great excitement to Thornton to meet an emigrant wood carver from central Europe who was able to produce the work which you can see today.
One day in the office I asked where Mr Visser was and was told he had gone overseas. It appeared he had gone to Robben Island to inspect suitable slate to match tiles on the floor of the Sendinggestig Kerk in Long Street which he was restoring.

When rebuilding the missing 1802 front gable of his house Vredenburg according to Burchell’s drawing, he enjoyed putting a final decorative touch of the initials DVV and JDB which covered the whole Visser family including David and Bertha!

Dirk was a cultured man in the very best sense of the word. We shall remember him for his love of the beauty in man-made things as well as in nature and his deep understanding and appreciation of quality, at a time when everything is being impulsively consumed and then hurriedly disposed of.

According to a gently smiling hospital sister, on his last day in hospital, no doubt in considerable discomfort, he gave her a blast, and afterwards said, ‘I’m sorry I’ve been a bit crabby today, I didn’t really mean it, from inside’.

And so, it has been a privilege for all of us today to have joined Jean, David, Julie, Patrick, Bertha and Gavin in celebrating Dirk’s Life.
SUMMARY OF DIRK VISSER’S EARLY LIFE

Mike Visser

The author was an architect, a regular member of the VASSA Committee for several years, and is Dirk Visser’s elder brother.

Dirk was born on the 10th of July, 1930. I remember my Father taking me to see my second, pink, bald little brother the morning after his birth at the Nursing Home on the Main Road at Plumstead – the house is still standing.

The next thing I remember was my sixth birthday – Sunday, 7th September, 1930 – when lots of people came to our house at Bredasdorp for what, I thought, was to be my very important birthday. Not so! It was instead Dirk’s Christening party!

We moved from Bredasdorp to Napier in 1931. Here Dirk started school after the holidays in July 1936. My Father was transferred to Fraserburg and we left Napier on the 7th December 1938, the tenth birthday of my brother Adriaan (Ap). I remember the date because Ap was given a mouth organ and was driving my Father, a fairly nervous driver, berserk.

We lived at Fraserburg during the War years where we all went to school. During this time I put my foot down and told my Parents that my little brothers were now older than I was when I started baby-sitting for them and that I flatly refused to do it anymore!

My Father was transferred to Vanrhynsdorp towards the end of 1943 and Dirk and Adriaan entered the High School in January 1944 in standard seven and eight respectively. Dirk matriculated in 1947 – just about the time of my Father’s retirement.

My Parents then moved to Cape Town and bought a house in Rosebank, which was handy for attending UCT where Dirk entered the School of Architecture in 1948.

Dirk went to London in 1956 and worked for the Architects Co-Partnership. I was in Kenya at the time and, when I came back to Cape Town, Dirk and I shared a flat in Rondebosch until the 12th of January 1963 – when Dirk married Jean Barry of the farm Riverton, Robertson.
DIRK VISSLER, ARCHITECT

Jane Visser

The author is Dirk Visser’s niece and an architect in private practice. This tribute was paid at his Wake on 9 January 2003.

I don’t feel that qualified to say much about Dirk as there are so many of you who knew him longer, or worked with him in the professional sphere. His family - Jean, Mike, David, Julie and Patrick, Bertha and Gavin – I’m sure I join everyone else here in wishing you love and support.

I’m just going to say a few things about what my Uncle Dirk meant to me. There are two ways I think about him. Firstly, it’s impossible for me to talk about Dirk without talking about his being an architect. And secondly, I think of him as one of three brothers – Mike, Ap and Dirk.

Quite an architect. Jean told me something on Tuesday. She overheard David on the phone to the Cape Times about the notice. He said, ‘make the notice large – he was quite a famous ou’.

I’m sure that I’m an architect because of my Uncles Mike and Dirk. Even my father was a frustrated architect. What made these three men all become so fascinated by how things are made and what makes good design? I talked to Dirk about this twice when I knew he was sick – I wish I’d started earlier. I asked him where did it all start? What made you become an architect … and he just talked and talked.

The first thing he mentioned was his family, and especially his mother, my Ouma Christophene Louw. She had grown up on the farm Babylonstoren surrounded by Cape furniture. He admired her taste.

Dirk also talked of going ‘Cape Dutching’ as a student. He used to go with a group of friends to Cape Dutch homesteads and just knock on the door and ask if they could look around. This was the start of his wonderful deep feeling for Cape Dutch architecture.

I was very lucky while I was studying to get a number of chances to work in my vacs at Munnik, Visser, Black, Fish and Partners. From the perspective of running my own practice now – and knowing how useless architectural students are - I am particularly grateful for the effort and energy that Dirk and the others put into my training. At the end of my first year was the first time I spent a few months working pretty much for Dirk – it was an education. I got an inkling of the kind of detective work that goes into a restoration project. He seemed to downplay the decisions he made as ‘Ag, it’s obvious’, etcetera, but the older I get, the more I realise that being able to see those kinds of obvious strategies in an almost intuitive way is only possible with a formidable background knowledge.

What impressed me the most was the depth of this knowledge and the architectural vocabulary that Dirk had: all the terms for all kinds of Classical ornamentation; practical recipes for materials and methods of building; an
encyclopaedic memory for how various design details worked. I began to realise that the kind of skills that a great architect has are acquired over a lifetime and that University merely gives one the means to achieve these skills. It was pretty humbling. At the same time it was inspiring to think that, with application, one could only improve with time and age which is unusual in most people’s careers.

Dirk could draw very beautifully – and as someone who has never quite embraced the cold computer drawing, I found this the thing I wanted to succeed at the most – clearly set out and beautifully lettered drawings. Dirk had quite a bit of a shake in his hand but when the clutch pencil point connected with the paper he made decisive and sensitive lines. Meticulous attention to detail: all lovely full size pencil drawings of joinery details and plaster mouldings – even locks and things. Although they seem anachronistic in the time-is-money era, still, there is so much pleasure in making these drawings – so thank you Dirk for that.

It is a rare privilege to be able to get such daily pleasure and fulfilment from one’s work – I know that this was the case for Dirk as it is for me. Being an architect was so much part of who Dirk was that it was sad to see that he was never quite the same after retiring from full time work. Maybe architects can’t retire if it’s that much in your blood.

I remember three houses Dirk and Jean lived in before their Mowbray house – the Palmboom Road house backing onto the SACS fields and playing with tadpoles and Lego, the Kenilworth house and reading Tintin and David’s white rats that had gone wild in the garden, Vredenburg and more of David’s animals – snakes in the vegetable patch this time. Together Dirk and Jean had a marvellous ability for arranging rooms and living with antiques. Their houses had a lived in quality combining contemporary with antique and never got that museum feeling. Dirk particularly had a way with bold arrangements of flowers – I’ll never forget armfuls of blue forget-me-nots massed in a bowl. It was very exciting when Dirk bought Vredenburg – we had memorable meals at that huge table with the heavy glasses and snoring dogs and sunlight slanting in through the top of the front door. Bertha and Gavin’s beautiful wedding was a great finale to living in that house.

I said that Dirk is also forever one of three brothers. It must be very hard for Uncle Mike to be the last of the brothers. He will miss having someone to share those esoteric Cape Dutch talks with. Another someone who knew all the complicated family histories and who owned what farm or furniture and who married whom that just astonishes the rest of us. We will miss those family gatherings with all three of them talking loudly and with much opinion and interrupting each other noisily and being downright rude. Difficult and clever and fascinating and passionate – that’s how I’ll remember Dirk.
THE DOVECOTE AND DOWER HOUSE AT ALPHEN

Nicky Cloete-Hopkins

The author’s family has owned Alphen for 150 years. Today part of the complex runs as a noted hotel while the old wine cellars house offices.

The Dovecote

In 1989 a council inspector told us we had to build our own substation or close down the hotel. Dudley and I were due to renovate the Dower House on the Great Square when the inspector informed us that someone had illegally bypassed a system during my father’s lifetime and we were using too much electricity. The current was overloading the wires and causing a danger of fire.

Horrified we said there must be some other way. There wasn’t, and Dudley said to Dirk, who had been working with us for about five years by that time, ‘Disguise it as a folly or something.’ We put plans for the Dower House on hold and asked Dirk to concentrate his efforts on building a substation. The 1950s council substation for the area (facebrick, plaster, metal windows and orange tile roof) is in the public open space about 50 metres from the present southern boundary of Alphen. The ideal site for ours was as near as possible to that one, on the banks of the Diep River, at the end of a path leading from the 1772 water mill. It was in line with the strict grid pattern of the farm complex and gardens, much of which had been destroyed in the early and mid part of the 20th century. We briefed Dirk to have fun, create a ‘folly’ and incorporate the Mitford-Barberton crucifix and family plaques from a Garden of Remembrance, demolished after the farm was subdivided. Dirk suggested the dovecote – although we have had difficulty in keeping doves there. A little flamboyance has often enhanced the severity of the architecture at Alphen, and Dirk’s sketches for the proposed dovecote delighted us.

The builders had nearly completed their work when the then National Monuments Council sent representatives to inspect it. They commented that the design was not ‘honest’ and that we were fooling the public in making it look like a historic building. We have never been clear as to whether they felt we should build a utility building such as the substation on the greenbelt or erect something ultra-modern like the glass tower at the Louvre, which caused so much controversy at the time. In any event it was too late to look at alternatives and I happily satisfied requirements by putting the date and the name of the architect and builder on the side of the building. Subsequently we commissioned the tile family tree, also dated, from Ella Lou O’Meara for the new Garden of Remembrance on the south side of the building.
The Dovecote at Alphen. [Photograph Stewart Harris]
The Dower House

The Dower House was originally two 18th century cottages. At some time they were joined together and, in the late 19th century, my great-grandfather Henry added a second storey to make a house for his widowed sister Augusta. During the 1940s my father, Sandy Bairnsfather Cloete divided the house into three units for farm staff and letting purposes, one downstairs, and two upstairs accessed by an outside staircase. In 1962/3, when Sandy turned some of the buildings into a hotel, he further divided the three apartments into eight bedrooms with drywall partitioning and put bathrooms in spare passages. These were never satisfactory and the wooden floor and partitions meant noise travelled easily between rooms.

In 1990 Dudley and I asked Dirk to complete the designs he had been working on the previous year. We needed spacious rooms and bathrooms and an internal staircase in keeping with the expectations of a new generation of travellers. Internally there was little worth saving. The wooden floor was rotten and we planned to replace it with a noise-proof concrete slab. Dirk decided to gut much of the interior of the old building and build on the new staircase and two new rooms to keep the original number. An oriel window faces the magnificent south façade of the Great Cellar and gives light to the stairwell.

The main façade onto the Great Square appeared incomplete. The Victorian proportions did not gel with the Cape Dutch architecture of the rest of the buildings on the Square. The demolition of the Deanery in Orange Street had always rankled with Dudley and he wondered if it was possible to acquire and reassemble the facade, which had been dismantled and sold. That was the inspiration, but not practical. We asked Dirk if the Dower House could have been meant to have shutters. ‘And probably a portico too,’ he said. ‘They must have run out of money. We can put them on if you want.’ Few people remember the uninspired building before Dirk transformed it.

Dirk gave us a lot of sensible help in respect of the Manor House, the Jonkershuis, Cellars and our own house. There is still one more Dirk extravagance, which we hope to achieve – it is on paper in a drawer until we can afford it. We loved working with him, sitting outside the Jonkershuis under the oak trees with a glass of wine, discussing architecture here and abroad, sketching alternatives for our projects and talking about the methods of construction used by the early builders.

Dirk had that rare ability to interpret and give his clients what they didn’t know they wanted, and inspire them to look beyond the mundane. His genius gave us what must be the most beautiful substation in South Africa. He complemented and enhanced the Dower House and consequently the Great Square and he has given Alphen a gift all that follow must appreciate.
I am going to speak briefly about Dirk’s inspiration of and part in the Institute of Architects’ endeavours. I was surprised to discover that he had only joined the Institute in 1971, and I’d like to think that he joined precisely in order to play the role that he did.

The most important and influential contribution that the Institute has made to the conservation and planning of the city is its leading role regarding the Catalogue of *The Buildings of Central Cape Town*, in which Dirk had perhaps the seminal hand. I say this because in 1970 he had, as a member of the Simon van der Stel Foundation, been responsible for completing a list of significant buildings in the western part of the city centre. This list was given to the City Council and it became the forerunner or basis for the Catalogue that was published in 1978.

Many of you here also made important contributions to the Catalogue, and you will know of his many efforts in the Cataloguing Committee – his indefatigable work in the identifying of significant buildings and in the classifying of their significance and, of course, his contributions to the 1984 companion volume and to the on-going series of conservation studies commissioned by the City Council.

The first 1978 Catalogue led directly to the need for conservation-area controls and to the identification of a number of conservation areas in the city centre in 1979. The Institute’s Heritage Committee, with Dirk and Revel Fox and Gawie Fagan at its vanguard, played a central role in these processes.

In 1979 too the West City Action Area was established by the City Council with the intention of promoting its conservation. And Dirk represented the Institute on a technical sub-committee in this regard.

These endeavours led to a very significant victory for the environmentally-minded when the proposed elevated Buitengracht Freeway was reduced in scale and to a conventional street at ground level, also in 1979. Dirk’s drawing showing the visual impact on the Lutheran Church had clinched the argument.

The Institute’s endeavours in the West City also led directly to the creation of the Cape Town Heritage Trust, and the properties purchased for road widening associated with the Buitengracht Freeway were given to the Trust at its establishment in 1988. Dirk served continuously from its inception as a trustee.

The relatively recent completion of the Heritage Square revitalisation (previously proposed as a multi-storey parking garage for 2 000 cars) was also a fruit of Dirk’s early 1970 list, perhaps even that list’s unvoiced real intention – the preservation of a whole piece of the old city. Indeed, its success as an exciting, active, alive piece of the old city is precisely what Dirk worked towards for much of his professional life.
Dirk Visser was an architect and a conservationist of note. The list of his contributions to, with and through the Institute is much longer – this is just a sample – but it is clear that Dirk has played a very definite and profoundly important role in the conservation of the city, not only in a conventional architect’s role, but as a visionary and driving force within the architectural profession. And he played a central role in the Institute’s Heritage Committee, giving advice and inspiration for thirty years.

We, and the city itself, will miss him.
VERNACKING WITH DIRK

Joanna Marx

The author was chair of VASSA from 1989 to 1995 and continues to participate actively. Since 1991 she has worked in heritage conservation, with the National Monuments Council, now the South African Heritage Resources Agency.

Dirk always enjoyed the Vernacs and their activities, and was a founder member who contributed a great deal to our society over many decades.

Dirk was one of the ‘grand old men’ of the Vernacs, the people who started exploring our heritage of vernacular architecture when there were no books and precious little knowledge of what existed or what it meant. (Of course he would have had some caustic comment on that epithet!) Our first President, James Walton, and our current President, Mary Floyd, have told me stories about arguments that would rage around the Waltons’ table when there were differences of opinion among the host, Gawie, Dirk, Hugh and contemporaries.

The late Dr James Walton said on more than one occasion that he considered Dirk to be the most knowledgeable of all the great ones. Indeed, his encyclopaedic knowledge was astonishing. In the second half of the 20th century he discovered or visited almost everything there was to see. Dimensions, materials, plans were written up, and constituted the basis for later comparisons and theories. When the debate about the origins of our gables was raging he drew gable outlines for some of the earliest books.

Dirk’s acute powers of observation and memory enabled him to identify buildings or parts of them on photographs, and he could tell you how he had arrived at his conclusion by elimination or by distinctive features. Furthermore, the Vissers (Mike, Dirk and Jean) knew the family histories of farmers and townspeople and could draw connections between people and places. It seemed that a large proportion of the important people in the Western Cape were related to the Vissers, Louws, van Veldens and Barrys.

During the 1980s Dirk and Jean bought Vredenburg, a ruinous dump in a cul-de-sac east of the Liesbeek River. The Vernacs visited the place after the previous owners had moved out, again during restoration and when the work had been completed. We were thus privileged to be able to follow the course of the restoration work, hear the reasoning behind certain decisions, see the detailing of original fabric as well as new replacements, and experience at first hand the complexities of a building site.

The restored thatched house was beautiful, inside and out, with the gable rebuilt according to an old picture and embellished with a monogram of Dirk and Jean’s initials. The house was furnished with armoires and other magnificent pieces of furniture as well as artworks, and lived in comfortably by the Visser family with numerous cats and dogs. Many a wedding, party and meeting took place in the garden, house and Victorian ballroom at Vredenburg. The stoep also provided the setting for a
long-running advertisement for Klipdrift brandy, which was enlivened by the unauthorised presence of one of their Golden Retrievers.

Between Riversdale and the sea, not far from Puntjie, lies a diffuse settlement of vernacular cottages called Vermaaklikheid. Dirk and his partners and a few other architects bought and repaired cottages for getaway places. The Visser cottage served its purpose well, as Dirk had put in only basic services; it was unfussy and relaxed.

Then there was the time when The Terraces, Bree Street, was being planned. Munnik, Visser, Black and Fish were involved in the project. The building was to be the first fairly tall one in that old part of the city, and was therefore the subject of much public debate, some of which took place in the newspapers. The height, bulk and design of the new building were publicly scrutinised, as were the implications for old building stock of the area. The façades of a corner building (Stephan’s) were to be restored, the interior levels changed and a mansard roof introduced. But worse: an adjacent building was to be demolished. When this happened the Simon van der Stel Foundation hastily stripped Dirk of office and terminated his membership.

Not long afterwards I was elected to the chair of the Vernacs. Feeling rather surprised and very inadequate, as I was the first female, non-architect to occupy the hot seat, I agonised about my situation until a flash of inspiration arrived. After consulting James Walton, honorary life president of the Vernacs, and each individual member of the committee, I approached Dirk to become vice chair of the Vernacs. He thought it over and accepted. The Vernacs had indicated that we were not going to reject our valued and eminent member because of an alleged error of judgement.

Committee meetings were held in the offices of GAPP, and were kept to the point. After the annual general meeting and election of office-bearers we would arrange a committee party for members and partners at which we could simply enjoy one another’s company. Several of these delightful parties were held in the beautiful voorhuis at Vredenburg with Jean and Dirk presiding, cats and dogs in attendance. We feasted on dishes specially prepared by each of us to add up to a splendid buffet.

Over a long period Dirk led numerous Vernac excursions, and what a joy it was to me to plan half-a-dozen of them with him. On site he would hold forth on the history of a house or farm, its context in time and place, and what was unusual or important about it. Then he would go and check or re-check the architectural details, explaining what he saw to bystanders, as well as its significance. Besides the wit and laughter many incidents stay in my memory, such as Dirk, standing in the sun in front of a farmhouse near Aurora, coaxing a story about the place out of the old lady of the house. And at Calvinia, showing us how he and the Coetzees had restored so many buildings that the town had regained much of its historical character.

Coach tours and their logistics were carefully planned and organised, with an eye to value for money. But on the first night of our four-day excursion in the Great Karoo the 50 participants were crowded like schoolchildren into the rooms of the hotel. After an indifferent dinner Dirk, treasurer Annette and I badgered the hotelier for more than an hour, and he grudgingly reduced the price. (The Vernacs lodged complaints with the authorities, and soon after the place closed down.) Dirk had restored the Drostdy in Graaff-Reinet and for our three-day excursion there and to Nieu-Bethesda he cut a deal whereby we were charged R39 per night but paid normal prices for meals.
How else could the Vernacs have had the pleasure of staying in that magnificent place? We packed our glad rags and enjoyed stylish dining under the great chandeliers.

Closer to home I have often travelled with one or more of the Vissers, a guarantee of an interesting and entertaining day. With Dirk I dodged (unsuccessfully!) between car and house in the pouring rain between Durbanville and Agter-Paarl, and most recently on a sunny day trip to Agter-Paarl where we did a quick side trip to pick up cheeses at bargain prices at Fairview.

Dirk taught people on the hoof, practically, on the spot. He was not a writer of publications. When I bemoaned this to a friend I was sharply put in my place and reminded that for two decades I have been able to learn from Dirk, and that it was my responsibility to use and expand what I had learned and to pass it on to others. We must all take what he gave us so generously and keep building on it.

Indeed Dirk gave us general principles of vernacular and historical architecture as well as knowledge and understanding of materials, methods and detail. It is a way of looking analytically at a building so that it will yield its meaning. For this he brought to bear the broad and deep knowledge that he had himself accumulated of art, aesthetics, history, architecture, technology. Dirk was a finely honed cultural being.

*Ave atque vale!* Hail and farewell!
DIRK VISSER, MENTOR

David van den Heever

The author is a former Chair of VASSA and partner of GAPP Architects.

Dirk was one of my studio masters at UCT in the early sixties. His enthusiasm for and interest in old Cape architecture was apparent from the start and for me, very infectious. In those days there were no electives for Conservation Studies, and we all were required to prepare measured drawings of historic buildings as part of our course. Dirk’s encouragement and careful tuition made me realize at that early stage how unique and precious our historical heritage really was. I then and there developed a special interest in the subject, which has never waned.

As the years went by, I watched with envy how Dirk restored one historic building after another. He was, of course, a very good modern architect as well and his partnership with Mike Munnik produced some excellent new buildings. However, Dirk’s passion for old buildings grew ever greater and his work brought him many awards in recognition of its quality.

It was later in the Vernacular Architecture Society, however, where I really began to appreciate Dirk’s knowledge of the subject in all its facets. He knew every aspect of historical Cape building construction and his mind was a veritable databank of detail, whether Baroque, Neo-Classical or any other. Members of the Vernacs, when on outings, were held spellbound as he analysed a gable, a moulding or some traditional roof construction. He could recall with great ease, obscure details from far-flung farms, to compare with the object of our immediate attention. He was also an expert on old Cape furniture and again on Vernac outings, he would discuss with great knowledge any pieces that we might encounter.

To say that he was my mentor is not over-stating the case: much of the knowledge I have of Cape buildings I learned from him. There was a time when, on certain days, we used to have lunch together at the same table at the old Stuttaford’s Restaurant and I used to unashamedly ask him in detail about his latest restoration projects. He would describe the progress of the works and the decisions taken, much as a detective might be talking about solving a complex murder case. All Dirk’s decisions were backed up by meticulous research and on-site investigations – descriptions of his work at Elsenburg, for example, where Martin Melck had worked on a ‘big’ scale, were particularly riveting.

I will miss Dirk, more particularly because I believe that he possessed more knowledge than anyone on the subject of Cape architecture, so much of which will now remain forever unrecorded. I salute a friend, mentor and huge figure in the field which we all enjoy so much.
I REMEMBER DIRK …

Len Raymond

The author is the Director of Daljosaphat Restorations, a building restoration company existing for 21 years, who worked closely with Dirk Visser.

… for his excellent memory and brilliance!

In my early days we were working on a house in Northern Paarl which had a double row of rooms and a very narrow gable, a construction which seemed impossible. I explained the problem to Dirk because we wanted him to come and have a look, but before I was half way through the explanation on the phone, Dirk rattled off 3 or 4 examples of side walls built upon the woodwork (all Elliott photos). It was a number of years before I came upon an original one, that at Wildepaardekloof in Ashton.

Dirk was the architect at The Glen, Swellendam. There was no front gable on the manor house, but an early photo showed a leg-of-mutton gable. It is an H-shape house and when we started working on the roof, we discovered the cut-off truss between the centreline of the side wings and front gable. This means that there must have been a full gable when the thatch roof was built. There were also swags and mouldings on the front façade, some of which were still there and showed on the photo with the leg-of-mutton gable. I phoned Dirk from Swellendam and told him about the truss. No explanation of the implication regarding the gable was needed. Before I could get there, Dirk was there already. Then he went right past me, said ‘Klippe River’, and that he would phone back. By the time I got to Paarl that evening, Dirk had superimposed the swags and mouldings from the nearby Klippe River onto the [remnants] existing at The Glen and had a perfect match. Klippe River and The Glen were a perfect matching pair.

This story gets more interesting. We copied Klippe River, and the owners promptly complained to the National Monuments Council (now SAHRA). Monuments Director, Dr Loedolf, who had a personal vendetta against Dirk, Gawie Fagan and I (can we ever forget those dark days of Loedolf and Pollet) smacked a court injunction against the owner, the late Ian Frazer Jones, at his stockbroker’s office in Johannesburg, on the day of the big stock market crash. Ian was not amused. But there was a good ending. Within days Dirk had not only convinced everybody of the merit of his action but also proved that Klippe River was in fact a copy of The Glen. Did Dirk enjoy that!

… for his humility!

We were working on the outbuilding at Non-Pareil in Daljosaphat. It was obvious that a portion had fallen down. We slowly uncovered the foundations and as we went further and closer to the nearby dam wall the ground became deeper and we uncovered more and more wall remains, floor finishes and original door positions. Some 20 metres later we were right into the dam wall and exposed the walls to the height of more than a metre at the back gable. There we found this strange fireplace in a room with big doors and a stone floor. Working with us was an old bricky from Elim, the late ‘Oom
Dennis’. Dennis said a word or two about a similar thing he had worked on in Elim; explained to us how this blacksmith hearth worked. Without further ado, measurements or drawings, Dirk’s instruction was simple – ‘Jy ken hom, bou hom’. There are few architects who can appreciate that that is how these old dwellings were built and who would have been big enough to admit that no matter what his station in life, Oom Dennis knew more about the old hearth than he did. It was a characteristic of Dirk that he allowed the artisans’ licence and the more he trusted them, the more he let them interpret his knowledge. Nowhere more so than the front gable at Vredenburg where, with Willie Fennies, they created Dirk’s masterpiece.

Dirk quickly assessed the quality of your staff. When a milk truck ploughed into the corner of the ‘Old Boys’ School’ in Swellendam and threatened to pull the building down, which was now supported by the truck, Dirk was in Graaff-Reinet with Gerrit Froneman. When Dirk could not get me, he phoned Willie Apollis, who was busy at the Agulhas Lighthouse at the time. He and Willie discussed the problem and Willie propped and supported the building and extracted the truck while Dirk and Froneman flew down to Swellendam, arriving in time for lunch, which was where they were when I found them. Willie was already back at Agulhas.

… for his after work ‘dop’!

When working at Vredenburg (with Dirk, Jean and kids resident) Dirk phoned me one evening talking with 30 second intervals between words. Willie should do this; this was not exactly right, etc. We arranged to meet the next day on site at 11:00 am. Dirk arrived, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, walked up the garden path, and asked ‘What do you want to see me about?’ Oops. This happened twice a week. I quickly learnt. From then on I wrote down Dirk’s after work ‘dop’ comments and raised them as my queries the next day (he never missed an arranged meeting) and so I learnt to see into Dirk’s mind.

… for his excitement!

Vredenburg was a really exhilarating experience. I remember the day Dirk signed. He phoned about a house, gables, etc, which I never even knew existed. Dirk knew it all. After a good look at a building he could see it finished and was always passionate and excited at the start. As most of his jobs progressed, the clients got more and more excited and passionate as they saw it develop; Dirk got more and more bored. In his mind’s eye he saw it finished from day one. Dirk needed something to excite his imagination and fire him into action. Like the afternoon I phoned Dirk at his office to tell him we had found a VOC *brandmerk* (trademark) on the reverse of one of his ceiling planks at Vredenburg. I put the phone down and – there was Dirk.

Dirk performed at his best with a challenge. The discovery of the portion of a stone carving inside the ceiling space of the later lean-to at Agulhas Lighthouse set Dirk scuttling back to his office to draw the complete design. The wall paintings at Neethlingshof had even Dirk surprised; excavating the mill wheel pit at The Glen outbuilding and then the corresponding cellar inside was another challenge Dirk enjoyed. Even Dirk was excited to see the front door at Elsenburg re-instated. Any work at Babylonstoren (his mother’s home) gave Dirk special pleasure, even if only
replacing the hearth in the kitchen. But Dirk was never happier than when faced with
the challenge of designing a gable or special moulding, often only guiding the
craftsmen, as with the wavy parapet at Valkenburg.

I remember the day that Gawie Fagan, Dirk and I were on our way to
Johannesburg for an important meeting. We checked in, sat down over coffee to
strategise, and the plane left without us. SAA say they called us 10 times! We caught
the next flight though.

... for his slip ups!

We were working at Parel Vallei, Somerset West. We had started cleaning up before
Dirk was approached. Within days Dirk had the gable drawn (he copied the demolished
Clara Anna Fontein, Durbanville/Malmesbury area) and used a ground plan measured in
his student days. We tackled the building section for section. When we got to the
second last section per drawing and we set it out, 5 metres were missing. Dirk had
taken a drawing from his student days (not by him, I think) and merely adjusted this.
But being unaware that one of the cross walls had been altered/demolished, he drew it 5
metres longer than it was. Was Dirk embarrassed! He disappeared from site and never
returned.

... for his generosity of time and effort!

From my very early days at Mill Street, right to the end at Burgundy, Franschhoek, Dirk
always gave of himself and shared his knowledge and experience. More is the pity that
he was not well enough to help us at Loedolf House in Malmesbury. We will now have
to take the responsibility ourselves. No more running it past Dirk as we all did before.

... for the pleasure of visiting Dirk and Jean!

Dirk and Jean were always generous and welcoming hosts. The two of them were a
veritable reference library of Old Cape families. I often sat amazed at their tales and
reminiscences – this right up to the end. No discomfort could rob Dirk of his hospitable
spirit.

... for the difference he made!

One of Dirk’s last consultations was at Burgundy/Bourgogne in Franschhoek shown on
the famous Arthur Elliott photo which shows the Queen Anne Tulbagh chair and
gentleman in front of the gable, with lifted eaves and a corrugated iron roof. Alys Fane
Trotter drew the scene with a thatched roof, no lifted walls but the same clipped gable
that Elliot depicted.

During the restoration in 2000 it was obvious to me that the gable had been
clipped but nobody would believe it (this despite all the physical evidence) – not
SAHRA, the Franschhoek Aesthetics Committee nor the archaeologists. We called
Dirk who immediately read the signs and confirmed the wider gable. Those who
expected a measured drawing for their approval were in for a surprise. Up the scaffold
went the bricky, at the gable end he was told to follow the existing moulding with an

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old piece of plastic electrical tubing and to bend it in a ¼ circle to Dirk’s liking. Another quick instruction to the bricky to copy the existing moulding and a description of how he saw the stems and flowers continuing on the gable, and away Dirk went. After a few days he returned 100% happy – and I must say Burgundy’s gable is perfect.

Dirk did make a huge difference and we shall miss him as a friend, conservationist and fellow campaigner!
READING THE STRUCTURE OF OLD CAPE BUILDINGS

Dirk Visser

These notes are extracted from a presentation made at a 1999 VASSA workshop, ‘Understanding and recording Cape Vernacular architecture’. Dirk spoke to slides on the screen and sometimes left words unspoken. What he said was transcribed by Rose Haughton and Antonia Malan and edited into essay form by Stewart Harris, Joanna Marx and John Rennie.

Reading the structure of a building is like reading a book: there’s no point in reading if you don’t know the language; and you must want it to tell you something. So to start off, if you’re dealing with vernacular Cape work you have to have some knowledge of the way that they built buildings in those days.

Walls

Whether the building is made of stone or brick or clay, the wall thickness is equal to that of the length of two bricks plus the plaster. That wall is founded on boulders laid in a trench. The topsoil is removed until you are down to solid earth then you put boulders in. They tend to work like a French drain which to some extent prevents rising damp – but not entirely.

The wall goes up at the thickness of two bricks to [loft] floor height, or first floor height, where the beams are placed spanning from wall to wall – about 5.5 metres. From that level up the wall reduces to a brick and a half thick. That walling goes up to where the thatch eaves are. Where the gable projects beyond the roofline the gable wall reduces to one brick thickness at the thatch level. Now this is a rule that is applied generally – but remember all the rules have exceptions. I know of houses, for instance Tuynhuys in Cape Town, where the walls are two and a half bricks thick down below – a half brick thicker than the normal. Newlands House is three bricks thick. So, the bigger and grander the building the more solidly it’s built.

Now the walls must have openings – for doors to enter through and for windows to let light and air in. The window openings and the door openings have to be spanned. So the door or window frame is made thick and stout and it carries that half brick width of wall in which it is set – the outer half brick width. The rest of the opening is spanned by a wooden lintel that spans from one reveal to the other. So the wall above the opening is supported partly by the frame and partly by the lintel – the lintel being on the inside. The lintel is flatter than the frame.

But if it’s a low casement window, then the opening will additionally be spanned above the lintel by a relieving arch which is built in the brickwork. What happens then is the lintel and the frame only have to support the half moon of brickwork below the relieving arch. When the opening is very high, for instance a high fanlight, and the head is close to the eaves line, or close to the line of the solder (ceiling/loft floor) where it’s under the gable, then the relieving arch disappears. This is for the
simple reason that the frame and the lintel can quite adequately carry the small amount of wall above them.

Those are all logics which come from a study of the buildings. You must then say to yourself, these are the rules, but of course rules are there to be broken. So when you start studying the building you must look at it in that language, but then if it says something which does not fit your assumption, then you must accept what it tells you.

Floors

Ground floors are often made just of earth or of clay. There is a typical recipe described by Dr Mary Cook which she discovered from labourers with experience in the Swellendam area. She used this to make the clay floors in the Drostdy. I also have a recipe out of a book published in England in the 1830s - how to make clay floors in country houses – which I used when we had to point between the cobble stones on the stoep of the Posthuys at Muizenberg. We didn’t want to use cement there and we found that clay was very good – after a time it got so hard it was like cement. Other ground floors could be timber planks – often placed on earth without any ventilation underneath. The space between the rising walls is filled up to just below floor level – in the Peninsula, often with sea sand full of shell material – and then half logs are laid in that with the cut surface upwards and then the planks are nailed down onto that.

Tile floors are laid on clay backing or a lime mortar backing.

Ceiling beams

I have always assumed that the Cape beam is a certain size, spanning 18 feet [5.5 metres]. But when you get a house grander than the normal house – like Elsenburg [which Dirk restored] – the span is one metre greater than the normal house. Now what size were the old beams at Elsenburg? The beams had disappeared and we had to put new beams in there. I couldn’t say what the stubs of the beams remaining in the walls would tell because I hadn’t yet opened up the plaster. So I took the standard beam and on this basis, from the 18 feet span to a 24 feet span, I pro-rata’d up the size. That was sufficient to give us the estimated quantity of timber needed so that costs could be predicted. When we opened up, we found the stubs of the original beams and I had to admit that Martin Melck had more knowledge of building than the average vernacular builder. His beams were just about the same size as the ones that I enlarged from the standard, but he was about a centimetre deeper and a centimetre narrower, so it was a more effective beam. Fortunately the quantity of timber was about the same so there was no cost involved.

Ceilings

First the beams are placed in position on the walls and then the ceiling boards or spaansriet (reeds) are placed on that. The boards are nailed down onto the beams. Spaansriet is laid down but often not nailed as the nails tend to split the reed, so they are sewn together with twine or with reed.
At Graaff-Reinet [where Dirk restored the Drostdy] we found that there was one room which we knew was the kitchen – but there were no ceiling planks. When we looked down, once we removed upper floor strips from the loft floor, we found the tops of the beams had little shadow lines closely spaced running from side to side – not a single nail or nail hole. I said this was a spaansriet solder – so the spaansriet was put back again. Then we had to decide what to tie them with, as the builders wouldn’t have brought twine from the Cape all the way to Graaff-Reinet. So we got a bees (cow or ox) tail to make roriem (thongs) – with the hair on – a building method which I have seen in that part of the world.

The spaansriet is covered with a clay layer, which can take various forms. It can be unfired clay tiles, laid down, and I've seen brick ones and also quite a variety of types. That clay layer is intended to prevent a fire in the thatched roof from getting into the interior of the building, so that at least your goods inside don’t burn.

**Roofs**

On top of that the roof structure is erected. The roof trusses, which are the basic support elements, are placed on alternate ceiling/loft beams – or every third beam, depending on how elaborate or stout the building is to be made. The trusses, then, are standing on the loft floor.

The trusses carry kaplatte (purlins) at the eaves line and at the hanebalk (collar beam) position and at the ridge where the truss beams cross. The kaplatte anchor the roof - the ends are then built into the gables, which then ties the gables together and ties the whole roof together. The kaplatte then carry the sparre (uprights) which carry the latte (laths) to which the thatch is fixed. Latte are usually rounded twigs, sparretjies (small uprights), or more commonly spaansriet. The centres are at 127mm from the first three spaces down the row, and then 230mm, and the top three are again 127mm.

Where the roof structure has disappeared you look at the ceiling beams on which the trusses stand. You will be able to identify where the roof trusses were because the beams will have the strap of an iron anchor showing inside on the one side. In many houses if you look up you will find anchor straps on every alternate beam, then you know that the trusses stand on alternate beams.

In a straight, long building you may have a problem with the stability of the roof. So to brace it you introduce diagonal members in the space between the kaplatte and the main truss. They are usually about 45°. Quite often you don’t have to do that because if you have a front gable the valley rafters of that front gable form the diagonal members and they therefore give you the support. Of course when you elaborate the house to H plan you have two crosses in the roof – where in each case you get four diagonals to brace your roof. So it's interesting –like one thing supports another, or ‘een hand was die ander’ (one hand washes the other).

**Changing styles**

Towards the end of the 18th century stylistic changes in Europe came over to the Cape as well. Ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian styles became popular because Greece was ‘rediscovered’. Napoleon had campaigned in Egypt and discovered Egyptian style, and Pompeii and Herculaneum were being dug up, so Roman style was again popular.
Neo-Classicism was an adaptation or mutation of the Renaissance Revival and it mutated through a whole series of Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo and again returned to Classicism. In the Cape that kind of change in styles also happened quite clearly. In the Cape Peninsula Classicism was used in the form of Newlands House for instance – in the 1750s – followed by Stellenberg, Groot Constantia and Kronendal.

That kind of Classicism was still here at the end of the 18th century. But then a new thing came in – it was commonly thought brought in by the English, but also the Dutch had a Neo-Classicism, which was applied here.

An interesting case is that of Nova Constantia where it is known that the house was built in 1807. Fransen and Cook say that the Georgian sash windows must have been put in at the time of the first re-thatching, ie 1825 or 1830 or thereabouts. When we opened up the house we found that those sash windows were original. They were built into the walls, the openings were not damaged, the lintels and everything were there, and there was no sign of any disturbance.

When we analysed the windows we found that both sashes slide, but there was only one groove. Now the Dutch sash window is a solid splay, which is used to support the wall, and on the inside is built a box in which the weights go up and down. That box is usually just a channel gouged out of the solid frame with a cover plate put on. And that is the case in Nova Constantia, but both sashes slide. Interestingly, there is only one weight for both sashes, so the sash cord is attached to the top of the bottom sash, goes over the pulley at the top of the frame, down under the pulley at the head of the weight, up over the pulley at the top again, and then attaches to the top sash. So both sashes are counter balanced by the same weight. This is very clever and very effective.

So here we have a case where we’ve got a double-hung sash window, which is not English but somewhat like a Dutch one where the top sash slides. The general rule is that the upper sash and the back window are fixed – but at Nova Constantia it isn’t. This window is a mutation. By the 1820s when Somerset decided to do his thing at Newlands House, the first really proper English windows appeared – elaborate grand windows – but even these were inserted under the old Dutch lintels that were already there.

So stylistic changes were going on here parallel to the English fashions, but then the English themselves came in and started affecting building techniques and styles in the Cape Peninsula. But beyond the mountains they were still carrying on in the old way. By the 1830s, when the so-called ‘Old Boys’ School’ or Olyvenkrans College House was built at Swellendam, old-fashioned 18th century Dutch sashes were placed into that house. There is nothing English.

Stylistic variation can be picked up in the detail. The quadrant moulding on the frames at Boschendal is less fashionable than Rhone, which was built earlier. Rhone has much more up to date moulding to its splays – elaborate Neo-Classical moulding – and has much finer, careful classical plasterwork than Boschendal.

Beyond the mountains, at Klaasvoogds, Montagu, for instance, you find that towards the end of the 19th century gabled houses were still being built and some of those gabled houses had corrugated-iron roofs right from the start – they never had

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thatch. You can again see families of gables in this time – the same group of people, builders or designers, were responsible for the design of those buildings.

**Archival records**

I have come across a carpenter’s accounts for van den Bergh’s house (Stellenbosch Village Museum) where it is clear that he slipped up and charged for one fewer window than he put in the house. He describes the work fully. There were two columns to support the gallery that were actually ship’s masts. There is also a list of material he gathered before the building was started. First of all they stockpiled building material in the warehouse. Underneath the wooden floor of the building we found a tiled floor. Mrs Hoffman, the curator of the house, said that she had the inventory of building materials, and this included *vloersteene* (floor tiles). When we calculated the number of tiles needed to cover the floor, it exactly matched with the number of tiles in the list. But this kind of record is rare, because they were only kept by officialdom, not ordinary people. The Genootschap acquired van den Bergh’s house and warehouse and the church was built where the house stood. For a major official job – the Castle – the records were hidden for defence reasons, or taken away.

There is often a problem with the archives. For instance there is a very fine farmhouse, Windhoek, near Klawer, in a hole the mountains where the wind comes howling down so it is very aptly named. I saw it from a distance, thought it looked interesting and went there. The owner and his two daughters were living there. He said the house was built in 1815. I asked why there was no record of it. He said that it was a loan farm until the 1940s when two brothers inherited the farm and wanted to divide it and so had to have it surveyed. Before that they couldn’t afford to have it surveyed. For someone like Dr Mary Cook, looking in the archives for registration records of the farm, it didn’t exist – it was a loan farm. As far as I was concerned, the house was not the original one because the stable next door had original wall paintings – a frieze near the top of the wall. Who puts wall paintings in a stable? – so it must have been the original house. You have got to look at all the possible sources.

When you’re working on a building you discover things when you open up. For instance we were able to date the canal at Elsenburg to before Martin Melck’s house. In one room we removed the floor and underneath it the two walls were plastered and limewashed below the floor level. These walls were made of smaller bricks, but Melck was a stonemason and made particularly large bricks. Melck had therefore retained part of the old house for practical reasons. The centre line of the old house was slap on the centreline of the bridge over the canal. Martin Melck’s house is a bigger house, so the centre line has shifted and is not aligned with the bridge any more. Therefore you can argue that the bridge over the canal predates Martin Melck’s house.

**How do you decide what to restore?**

Every time you deal with an old building you have to start again – make it a whole debate: What is it? What has it become? What does it want to become? To what extent do you restore?

For the Drostdy at Graaff-Reinet, they said it was mad to pull down an early 20th century double storey and get that little gabled house out of it. Quite correct, it was
drastic. But if you take Parsonage Street as a piece of early urban design with Reinet House (Pastorie) at one end and the Drosdy at the other – the street is closed in. Then you may decide to take the Drosdy back to its old form – not restoring the building as much as restoring the street. As a result you see it – Government sitting firmly on the ground, flat, straight out. At the other end you’ve got the spiritual authority (of the Pastorie) – elevated, reaching for the heavens. Very interesting to compare those two houses.

The problem is what do you restore to. How do you decide? Very often you can’t make that decision until you have a builder on site digging. It is a tricky issue and every time you enter that debate you may come up with a different answer.

An interesting situation was when Stellenbosch Village Museum restored the old police station – Landdrost Bletterman’s house. We knew it had six gables because the studs remained in the loft, but we didn’t know what they were like and had to decide what to put on. I suggested the Wesleyan Parsonage, which stood across the road, be used as a model but that was too early for Museum Director Marius le Roux’s wishes. I suggested the gable from Paarl Diamant, because from the inscription, one gable was of the same family as the Drosdy gable at Stellenbosch. Marius went to the archives to find out who owned Paarl Diamant at the time that it was built, 1794. Unbelievably, it was owned by Bletterman’s brother! We could imagine the circumstances. Bletterman retired early – he didn’t want to work with the British – and had a party in his unfinished house. His brother was there, and they decided to build the gables.

When the building is simply to be kept as an artefact, stating something of its time – then it’s easy. You restore it as a ‘museum artefact’. At the Muizenberg Posthuys the floor – so interesting – was left as excavated by the archaeologist. It became a thing to show.

But if good additions have been made, you may wish to keep them. The initial house is always well built – but suddenly ‘volgende winter kry ma nog ’n kind’ (the next winter mama had another child). Then they quickly build on a room – quick, quick – not the same quality building as the original because they’re in a hurry.

The siting of a house

Vredenhof at Paarl has one outbuilding – I think it’s the wine cellar – that has a very fine elaborate gable, yet the building is at right angles to the slope of the ground. I can’t understand why somebody would do that. You build such an elaborate gable, but you can clearly see that the wing on the left is different from the wing on the right. People considered mountains dangerous – a wilderness. You turn your back to the mountain, or face downhill so people come up to your house. It gives you dignity. You may lift the house on a platform to look at distant view of rolling farmland and cultivation rather than wilderness. At Newlands House, for instance, where the entrance goes down to the house from Newlands Avenue, down the slope, to the house at the bottom - it is such an undignified approach. The house had been turned around by the time of the Newton Thompsons – you originally approached from the other side.

Reading the structure of a building is like reading a book. There’s no point in reading if you don’t know the language. And you must want it to tell you something.