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Cover illustration

Visgat / Vischgat, about 30km west of Loxton. Photo John Kramer, plan James Walton.

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Moving inside: changing values, attitudes and world view

Pat Kramer

Vernacular structures are the immediate product of their users and, therefore, they are sensitive indicators of people’s feelings and their ideas about what is or is not proper. This is why it is possible to claim that changes in values, attitudes and world view will be reflected in the vernacular architecture (Deetz 1977: 56).

Introduction

Corbelled buildings were the first permanent structures in a large area of the Great Karoo (Kramer 2012). They were constructed for the use of Trekboers. The main source of wealth for these small-scale stock pastoralists were their flocks of fat-tailed sheep. They were largely self-sufficient, selling skins, horns, ostrich eggs, soap and other products of the veld to earn money with which to buy items they could not produce themselves, such as sugar, coffee and dress fabric.

In this article I examine both early small, and later large corbelled buildings with regard to additions and alterations after the first corbelled building was constructed. Additions to the initial corbelled building, or even the abandonment of the building in favour of a new structure, indicate changes in how the builders viewed their place in the world and that they were aware of the impression their abode created on others. The development of more or larger interior spaces is also a sign that personal privacy became increasingly desirable, as did the transfer of domestic duties from the exterior to the interior. It is probably also an indication of increasing wealth.

Prior to the construction of these corbelled buildings, the Trekboers followed a transhumant lifestyle based on a system of grazing licences that allowed them to move their stock in search of water and grazing veld. They lived in wagons, matjieshuise (adopted from the Khoekhoe), and tents. The wagon was placed at the centre of the werf and housed any valuables, while the other portable structures were clustered around it (Naudé 2002: 110).
However, the whole land ownership situation changed once the Cradock Proclamation of 1813 was adopted by the British authorities at the Cape, and Trekboers could now apply for a farm (or more than one) in perpetual quitrent. The farm could now be bequeathed to whomever they wished or sold it at its full value, not just the value of the improvements on the original opstal as had been the case previously. In addition, all farms had to be formally surveyed and the cost of the survey, including the surveyor’s fee, had to be met by the farmer.

Under these new conditions of land ownership, and considering the financial investment made by the farmer, it became worthwhile to invest time and labour in constructing a permanent building in the form of a stone corbelled structure. This was an important development, as Naudé (2002: 110) explains: “The first structure, dwelling or sleeping hut, independent of the wagon, marks the first step in the evolution towards settlement and ‘to dwell’”.

The majority of these first buildings are believed to have been constructed between 1820 and the 1840s. They were modest and their domed stone roofs solved the problem of a lack of wood for roof beams. They provided comfortable interior spaces, but were not large by any means. For example, of the two corbelled buildings at Visgat, the first has an internal height of 2,8 metres and floor diameter of 2,5 metres, while the second building’s dimensions are 2,1 and 2,3 metres respectively. At Gansvlei, the internal height is 3 metres and the floor diameter is 3,3 metres.

The buildings were small, but families were large. As the traveller Henri Lichtenstein (1812: 113) found while journeying in the Middle Roggeveld in 1803: “It is moderate in this country to reckon upon ten children to each family, allowing for what may have been carried off by death ...”. Not everyone could fit into the small stone building, so tents, wagons and matjieshuisies continued to be used as accommodation for the extended family and were taken along when they moved from the woonplaas (home farm) with their stock to seek better grazing or water. The difference was that the corbelled structure now replaced the wagon as the nucleus of the werf around which other temporary structures were arranged.

The builders of these structures set about creating more interior space, and the reasons for expansion reveals something about their attitudes. Lichtenstein (1812: 107) stated that on his journey through the Roggeveld farmers expressed dissatisfaction with the houses they were able to build due to the lack of suitable raw materials. They quite obviously aspired to something “better”, but were still limited by the resources available to them.

The initial construction of a permanent building is a clear indication that the family now regarded that farm as their formal property. The extension of small round buildings by the addition of more buildings, or even the abandonment of the corbelled building for an entirely new abode, is the final physical manifestation of the acceptance of the site as a permanent home. Naudé (2002: 110) sums up the situation well: “The final endorsement of permanence is when the first hut is extended by new additions to its side or by connecting other nearby huts (sometimes rondavels) with each other forming a cluster and at the same time a new vernacular dwelling tradition. This phase can also be identified by the construction of a new dwelling - this time a rectangular structure with several rooms under a single roof.”

The corbelled buildings that existed on the farms which were surveyed in the early 1830s and granted in 1838, fall in the southern area of corbelled buildings around Loxton and Fraserburg, and they all tend to be small. These buildings had all the features found in rectangular buildings with which the Trekboers would have been familiar, that is, small windows, wall niches and stone shelves. In other words, they were merely rectangular houses now built in the round. The plastering and lime-washing of the exterior was also a feature which had status attached to it. James Deetz, writing in In Small Things Forgotten (1996: 155), quotes Henry Glassie as saying
[the buildings reflect] “... what each builder carried with him in an unconscious, explicit way...” and were “what was acceptable in his society – the size, shape of the house and its features”.

These farmers spent most of their time outside. All the functions of the home and farm had designated locations on the werf: kraals, a kookskerm (usually at the front and to the side of the house in such a position that smoke did not blow indoors), the bakoon, the place for making soap, tanning leather, burning lime, smithy, trapvloer and midden. The interior, consisting of a single room, also afforded no privacy and one stepped inside directly into the centre of the house.

Interestingly, in true vernacular tradition, the additions and extensions to corbelled buildings do not conform to any pattern or design and have been added in a free-form, organic manner.

**Extending the small corbelled building**

There are a few examples of small corbelled buildings being extended by means of additional small corbelled buildings arranged in a linear fashion. Because of the difficulty of breaking through the walls, which could make the original structure unstable, these buildings tended not to be interconnected and could only be entered from individual front door openings. An additional structural obstacle was the difficulty of attaching buildings with a round base shape to each other. The only way this could be achieved was to form a linear complex in which the front remains the front and the rear remains the rear. Cooking was still an outdoor activity, but at Rondawels the two corbelled buildings each subsequently acquired their own kitchen and one acquired an extra rectangular room, probably with a brakdak roof.

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*Figure 2. Aasvoelsvlei I.*
Aasvoelsvlei I, photographed by James Walton in 1960, is made up of two corbelled buildings connected by a third infill building, also with a corbelled roof. The diagram shows how this site developed. The single black lines illustrate the presence of later mud-brick extensions which were still partially standing when Walton visited, but have since disappeared. This werf was eventually abandoned.

Three small corbelled buildings at Eendefontein clearly illustrate the desire for more interior space. The buildings on the left and centre were probably built at the same time as they had an inter-leading doorway, which is now blocked. All three buildings face forwards and present the front façades to the visitor.

Accommodation at Eendefontein was eventually replaced by a simple rectangular cottage, subsequently embellished with columns and a stoep.

At Rondawels each of the two corbelled buildings subsequently had a kitchen constructed, indicating that the site was occupied by two families and also illustrating the gradual movement indoors of previously outdoor activities. The building on the right also had a small rectangular room attached, thus providing more internal space.
At both Koppiesfontein and Aasvoelsvlei II, accommodation is extended by means of the addition of a number of rectangular rooms, added one at a time, probably sometime after the original construction of the corbelled building. These additional structures had the dual goal of adding interior space while at the same time pushing the original corbelled structure to the back and well out of sight. In other words, the status of the original building was reduced and a ‘modern’ rectangular facade now presented itself to the visitor. However, at neither building was there any sign of an interior hearth, so cooking was still an outdoor activity, although the family had more indoor space and private spaces are now present.

At Koppiesfontein the small corbelled building (seen peeping out in the middle of the photograph) is obscured behind the two later square-based additions and the original door has been partially blocked to become a window. In the diagram, the original corbelled building is shown in solid black. Another way to increase the interior space was to abandon the corbelled building altogether and construct a rectangular house, sometimes with a ‘tail’ forming a T shaped building, with a hearth in the tail. This corbelled complex was eventually abandoned for just such a building.

Figure 5. Koppiesfontein.
At Aasvoelsvlei II, the original corbelled building has been extended by the addition of four more rooms, creating a house with five rooms which provided a measure of privacy. The additional rooms would have had flat brakdakke. However, as at Koppiesfontein, if the later rectangular house is approach front on, the corbelled building is hidden from sight. Its status has been reduced from being the only structure, to being a back room.

Moving into a new home

Alternatively, instead of trying to increase the interior space provided by the corbelled building, it could be abandoned or used for other purposes and, once a source for beams was found, a new rectangular house built. Two examples of this kind of expansion are found Gansvlei and Visgat.

The original corbelled building at Gansvlei was replaced by a stone rectangular building, now converted into a barn. The new structure had a central door and at least two rooms, one on either side of the door, as well as a hearth at one end. The roof was raised at a later date to accommodate the pitched roof (see also Visgat below).
At Visgat, the two modest corbelled buildings were reduced in importance after the rectangular building was constructed. According to James Walton (1989), the farm was transferred in 1860 at which point no mention was made of a house in the documents. He therefore suggests that the rectangular house was only built after this date. It was originally a flat-roofed house and the walls have been raised to accommodate a pitched roof, probably after the acquisition of corrugated iron made this possible in the 1870-1880s. These T-shaped houses, that included a hearth in the ‘tail’, replaced the small corbelled building on a number of farms. Was this the kind of building which Lichtenstein described as being desirable? It does appear that this style of house was considered to be an improvement on the small corbelled building, its facade being more impressive. In some cases gables were added at a later date. This type of building also provided some measure of

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**Figure 7. Gansvlei corbelled building with second house in the background.**

The front façade with the blocked front doorway between the two windows (middle) and side view (bottom) showing the outline of the height and width of the original building. The hearth was positioned where the rough patch of stones occurs.
privacy and now had an internal kitchen. The remnants of these early rectangular stone buildings are hidden within the walls of many ‘modern’ farmhouses.

Figure 8. Visgat: front façade (above). James Walton’s diagram gives a bird’s eye view. The dotted wall, which was a flat roofed room, has since been demolished.

Adapting a small corbelled building

Attempts to either cook within, or heat the interior of, some small corbelled buildings have been found. Two examples are at Bitterwater and Karels Graf.

Figure 9. Bitterwater (left) and Karels Graf (right).
The fashionable Victorian homestead

At Gorras, there is an interesting development which occurs on a few farms which benefitted from the early ostrich feather boom from the late 1870s. Gorras is a medium-sized corbelled building with internal height of 4.8 metres and floor diameter of 5.1 metres. It was already marked as a ‘roundable’ when the property was surveyed in 1870.

A rectangular stone room was attached to the corbelled building, but without an inter-leading door, and then a second rectangular space was attached to this room, this time with an inter-leading door. When Walton visited in the 1960s the first extension was divided into two rooms by means of a screen. In this case the corbelled building held on to its place in the front facade with additions running off to the side. However, money made from ostriches enabled the family to build a Victorian-style house on the other side of the werf, and it is this building which was first seen on approaching the werf. The corbelled building now stood behind the Victorian building on the opposite side of the werf. Undoubtedly, moving into a Victorian-style building, with its cat-slide corrugated iron veranda, double French doors, wooden fretwork decoration, cast iron fire place and other features (many of which were imported), would clearly indicate wealth, status, modernity and knowledge of a new type of architecture.

*Figure 10. Gorras. Despite the fact that James Walton did not show the second building extension on his diagram, it is visible in his photograph of Gorras.*
Extensions to large corbelled buildings

The later large buildings that lie in the northerly areas around Carnavon and Williston on the edges of the Kareeberge, however, present a different picture. Anecdotal evidence and information gained from surveyors’ diagrams indicate that these were constructed between the 1850s to 1880s, a time when much of the Karoo either had switched over to merino wool sheep or was in the process of doing so, and when wood (vyebos, wolfdoring and taaibos) could be obtained either from the kloofs of the nearby Kareeberge (Nico Hodgson, pers.comm.) or brought on a wagon from one of the now established villages. The doors for T’kokoboos built in 1851, for example, were brought from Beaufort West by wagon, and the yellowwood beams in Stuurmansfontein (pre-1874) must have been obtained elsewhere. Yet, people continued to build corbelled buildings when they had the means to build something else.

Gribble (1987: 74), quoting Upton and Vlach (1986) states that: “Architectural styles are seen to reflect cultural and social relations, embodied in functional and/or non-functional design components which are consciously and/or sub-consciously making a statement”. These large corbelled buildings, unlike the small corbelled buildings, definitely make a statement. They are large, imposing and impressive. The changeover to more profitable Merino wool sheep meant that attitudes in this area were also changing as people had to deal with a global wool economy and to move away from their more conservative, traditional, kinship-linked lifestyle. “Through the relationship with Britain, wool farmers and labourers in the Cape became involved in a transnational production process” (Lilja, 2013: 12).

Farmers in the area continued to build in the corbelled tradition ... but the buildings were large and imposing. Stuurmansfontein has in internal height of 7 metres, while Klipkolk has a height of 5,5 metres.
One important difference between these large later buildings and the earlier smaller buildings is that the building additions or extensions are smaller than the original corbelled building and clustered around the sides and rear. There is no attempt to hide the corbelled building. These were buildings in which people were proud to live.

In addition to increased interior space, a hearth or kitchen was built onto the side of the building. Structural problems meant that there could be no internal connection, and the kitchen could only be entered from the outside by exiting the front door and walking along a stoep to the kitchen. But the addition of a kitchen does indicate that some of the cooking activities have moved indoors.
Figure 13. Arbeidersfontein stands proudly facing the oncoming visitor. The little room to the left is the kitchen. Walton’s diagram and photograph show the arrangement of two additional rooms, both now demolished. Walton also indicates the position of the partition in the corbelled building.

Figure 14. Vaalhoek, with the kitchen on the left and the wagon house at the rear of the building. Even the wagon is now afforded some protection from the elements. Note that the ‘new’ buildings are smaller than the original corbelled building.

Finally, more furniture, probably more easily available and affordable from the new towns, could be fitted inside, and although the wall niches continue to be built, stone shelves are no longer included in the structure. Windows continue to be small, but glass window panes begin to make
their appearance. At Grootfontein there is a date of 1883 scratched onto the window pane in the corbelled building.

The building additions at Grootfontein were extensive but some of the rooms have been demolished. There was an indoor kitchen (indicated by the chimney), dining room and numerous other rooms, turning this into substantial accommodation. The family continued to live in this complex until the early 1950s, when they built a new house a few metres away from the corbelled building complex.

![Figure 15. Front view of Grootfontein (left) and rear view (right).](image)

The final move

Many of these large houses continued to be occupied until the Merino wool boom in the early 1950s, at which time money flooded into the district enabling people to fulfill their aspirations for a multi-bedroom house (with the privacy which that entailed), special function spaces such as lounge and dining room (with modern furniture) and indoor kitchen and bathroom. The exterior of many of these houses has brickwork laid in decorative patterns, and roofed stoeps with shop-bought metal stoep furniture.

![Figure 16. 1960s style house at Spoorkolk with decorative brickwork.](image)
Figure 17. The werf at De Put shows the development of accommodation on the farm. The corbelled buildings on the left, the Victorian/Edwardian house attached to the corbelled structures and, finally, the modern 1960s house set well apart from the more humble structures.

Conclusion

Although the larger corbelled buildings were constructed during the later building period, small buildings did continue to be constructed throughout the period and were a reflection of either the farmer’s relative financial position or the function of the buildings.

The corbelled buildings are iconic examples of vernacular architecture built by a fairly isolated people using only the materials they could find in their environment. As archaeologists we look at these buildings not only to provide information on the building technique, raw materials and other physical aspects of the structure, but also to give us clues as to the social organisation of the Trekboers and the image they wished to project to the outside world. This research on ‘moving inside’ also clearly shows the gradual movement of all domestic functions into the interior.

Credits

Unless specified in the caption, all photographs by John Kramer and all diagrams by Pat Kramer.

Bibliography


Moordenaarsgat: a correction

Nigel Amschwand

Tim Maggs once said to me that if one forms a hypothesis one should always form a second to test it against. I should have listened.

In the June 2014 (Number 29) issue of the VASSA Journal there appeared an article on the farm Moordenaarsgat. This farm was one of those situated above the 1847 border of the Cape, in the Kareebergen, that came into contention when the border was moved up to the Orange River. Prior to the moving of the border the Kareebergen was permanently settled by Basters and occupied between January and April by Colonial Trekboers from the Hantam and Onder-Roggeveld who took advantage of the good grazing after the summer thunder showers.

The aim of the investigation was to see if there were traces of Baster and Colonial Trekboer material culture on the site and if there were there any differences between these. Three field trips to Moordenaarsgat and some research in the Cape Archives resulted in a poster presented at a workshop in historical archaeology at UNISA and subsequently in last year’s article. In this article I expounded a view on the sequence of the buildings on the werf having researched the lessees of the place. They were as follows:

1864 Leased for one year to Daniel Johannes Theron for £5-0-0.
1865 Leased for one year to Adriaan van Wyk for £21-0-0.
1867 Leased for one year to Captain Wilson for £31-0-0.
1869 Leased to FJ Jooste for £12-0-0.
1872 Leased for 21 years to Johannes Daniel Moller at £40-0-0.

The quality of the building construction and the fact that the last lessee, Johannes Daniel Moller, had a 21 year lease and was therefore more likely to invest time and money in making improvements to the farm, lead me to state that he had “almost certainly” constructed the trapvloer and kafhok (see Figures 1 and 3). This was certainly wrong.

There are a number of other interesting farms in the Kareebergen and, while doing some research in the Cape Archives prior to making a field trip, I came across some correspondence of the Civil Commissioner of Fraserburg.\(^1\) This correspondence gave the background to the claims of Captain Wilson that he had overpaid for the improvements to Moordenaarsgat when he leased it in 1867. He had paid £122-0-0. The previous lessee, a Baster named Adriaan van Wyk, had paid £244-0-0 in 1865. This was a clue to which I did not pay sufficient attention.

In the correspondence, F.S. Balston, the Civil Commissioner, gives a complete history of the early lessees of the farm including what and by whom the improvements were made.

There was an earlier occupier of Moordenaarsgat, Klaus Olivier, and this may have been (see how cautious I have become) the Baster who made a claim for the farm Uust (Oest?) in 1856.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) CA CO 3108. Correspondence of Civil Commissioners, Volume E to G for 1867.

Figure 1. Moordenaarsgat: site plan.

When the land was leased to Theron, F.S. Balston and Andries Smit, a member of the Divisional Council of Fraserburg, valued the improvements at £115-15-0. When the farm was re-let to Adriaan van Wyk the same valuators set the price at £244-0-0. Van Wyk relinquished the farm a year later and two other valuators (Gerrit Visser and James Higgo) set a price of £122-0-0 due to the dilapidation of the improvements. Van Wyk lived at the adjoining farm Groot Fontein and some of his workers lived at Moordenaarsgat.

The correspondence lists the improvements when van Wyk took over the lease from Theron and it is obvious that there were improvements on the farm when Theron took occupation. This is indicated by the fact that Klaas Olivier and four others were credited with making improvements to the farm, Olivier by far the most with £52-0-0. The others were Wilson Eksteen (£25-10-0), Piet Robert (£9-15-0), Piet August and Zwart Robert (the latter two with £9-10-0 between them).  

It appears elsewhere that they were never paid anything although they had a valid lease for which they paid £5-0-0 a year.

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3 You will note that this is £19-0-0 short of the £115-10-0 valuation mentioned earlier. No explanation is given.
Figure 2. Part of the current 1:50000 map with the 1869 survey overlaid.

The valuation by Balston and Smit on Theron’s departure mentions:

At Moordenaarsgat
- Alterations to the “Chaff House and Trap Floor” (indicating that Olivier and the others had originally built it)
- A new round house (corbelled building)
- Various water furrows
- Beds of cabbages, carrots, onions, beans, etc.
- Fig trees
- Patches of mielies and pumpkins

At Klein Paulsfontein
- Fountain
- Kraal
- Oven

At Zwaartfontein
- Three gardens and a kraal

At Paardefontein
- Walls around the fountain
- Fig and fruit trees

These other settlements are shown on Figure 2.
A year later, Visser and Higgo made a valuation at van Wyk’s departure, and mention the dwelling house as being “much out of repair” and the round house “without a roof”. The value of this round house had fallen from £13-0-0 to £6-0-0. There is a mention of a house at Paardefontein but it could not have been substantial as it was valued at £5-0-0, less than a corbelled building without a roof.

What does this all prove? Do not jump to conclusions: I should have considered why the value of Theron’s improvements was relatively high and asked why it dropped so much. Also, there is more information in the Cape Archives than anyone can read in a lifetime.
People and places of the Piketberg
Mense en plekke van die Piketberg-kontrei

Antonia Malan

Over the past three years members of the Vernacular Architecture Society have been working in the Piketberg area recording the stories of families associated with some of the farms and settlements. We also started to identify the built environment and cultural landscapes, and to carry out archival research related to tracing the past history of these families and places. See VASSA Excursion to the Sandveld (2012), VASSA Journal 27 (2013) and www.vassa.org.za/the-sandveld-oral-history-project/.

At the end of the first phase we prepared some posters for exhibition at the Piketberg Museum. We wanted to thank the people we spoke to and to share the stories with members of their families, and to acknowledge their special heritage. The launch took place in April 2015 and the material will be on display through the year. At the party, Kay McCormick took some photographs of people with their portrait-posters and recorded happy reunions between families, some of whom grew up together but had not seen each other for several years.

Dina Abrahams.

Hannah-Reeve Saunders and Kowie Brand.
The Van Zyl family.

Dorothy Brand, Tinus van Zyl and Eric Burger.

Betty Abrahams with her son, Erol Luyt.

Dorothy and Kowie Brand with their son, François.
Watching some video footage.

Elsa Naudé translating.

Visitor and Barbara Barnard.

Tassie Koordom passed away in May.
WP01
Central Werf
WAGENPAD

South

WP09
Roelofsevel
Wagenpad

North

East

West

South

Waterval 1
Wagenpad

Drawings by Guy Thomas (2014).
Lambrechts family houses on the farm Groenfontein.