Cape Folk Architecture
exhibition

organized by the
Vernacular Architecture Society of SA

A Souvenir
This exhibition was first shown at the University of Cape Town’s Irma Stern Museum in October 2004. The curators, contributors and organisers are all members of the Vernacular Architecture Society.

Exhibition Committee:

Associated Project: Frank Joubert Art Centre, Newlands

Cover: based on design by Helena Fagan

Copy Editor: Hans Fransen

Publications General Editor: Antonia Malan

© Vernacular Architecture Society of SA, 2005
Permits to modify historical buildings

To comply with the National Heritage Resources Act (no.25 of 1999), anyone who wishes to modify historical structures must apply to the Western Cape Heritage Council for permission. A historical structure is defined as a building older than 60 years.

The Western Cape Heritage Council (HWC) issues a permit, based on the merits of the application and an environmental impact assessment. This permit takes into account the development planning and zoning regulations of a local authority’s Land Use Ordinance. By ensuring that heritage matters are included in impact assessments for proposed developments, developers are able to identify heritage resources. Thus developers will be able to proceed without uncertainty about whether work will be stopped if a heritage resource is discovered. See Provincial Government website: www.capegateway.gov.za.

To apply for a permit with the Western Cape Heritage Council contact:
The Head, Western Cape Heritage Council,
Private BagX9067, Cape Town, 8000
Tel: 021 483 9696; fax: 021 683 9842.

Permit applications must be made on the official form: Application to destroy, damage, deface, excavate, alter, remove from its original position, subdivide or change the planning status of a national heritage site, provincial heritage site, provisionally protected place or structure older than 60 years. For further details see the South African Heritage Resource Agency’s website: www.sahra.org.za.

Permit applications are available from:
The Provincial Manager,
South African Heritage Resources Agency
PO Box 4637, Cape Town, 8000
Fax: 021 465 3622; email dhart@sahra.org.za.

Funding for projects promoting heritage resource conservation

The National Heritage Resources Fund is a national heritage resources assistance programme. It is managed by SAHRA (see above). The programme provides grants or loans to approved community organisations or individuals for projects. Projects considered must promote heritage resources conservation or the protection of state heritage assets. In particular, projects that provide heritage resource management training and the inclusion of communities in the decision-making process will be favoured.

Applications for funding must be made in writing to:
Dumisani Sibayi
Head Office, SAHRA
111 Harrington Street, Cape Town, 8001
Tel: 021 462 4502; fax: 021 462 4509; email dsibayi@sahra.org.za

Die Rowland & Leta Hill Trust. Gelye kennis te neem dat bogaenoemde Trust tot stand gebring is met die volgende weselige doelstellingens:
1. Om die oprigting of instandhouding of verbetering van openbare tuine, veldblomtuine en reservate en hul wildevoëllewe te subsidieer of te steun.
2. Om openbare biblioteke, museums en kunsgalerye of enige of alle sodanige instansies met die aankoop van kunswerke, Africana, antieke ware of aartikels van geskiedkundige of kulturele belang te subsidieer of te steun.
3. Om by te dra tot die behoud van en die restourasie van geboue van geskiedkundige waarde vir toekomstige geslagte.

Aansoek word verwelkom van aansoekers in die Provinsie Wes-Kaap om te deel in die beskikbare inkomste, Aansoekvorms is beskikbaar van:
Mev. L.A. Prosser
Syfrets Trust Bpk
Posbus 86, Kaapstad 8000.
Volksboukundige Vereniging van Suid-Afrika
Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa

Die doelstellings van die Vereniging is om:

• die studie van die SA argitektuur en die gepaardgaande kultuur te bevorder en aan te moedig
• lesings te organiseer met die doel om belangstelling te stimuleer en inligting te verskaf
• navorsing te bevorder
• oorspronklike werk te publiseer
• die aantekening van plekke wat besoek is te onderneem en te bevorder
• studies of opnames te publiseer of in ’n bewaarplek vir die gebruik van studente en ander belangstellendes te huisves
• selektief te pleit vir erfenisbelange

Vir meer inligting oor die Vereniging:

Laat ’n boodskap by VOICELINK: 088 122 6771
Adres: Posbus 15347, Vlaeberg, 8018
E-pos: vassa1@hotmail.com
Webbladsy: www.vassa.org.za

The aims of the Society are to:

• promote and encourage the study of South African architecture and its cultural context
• organise lectures
• arrange excursions and study tours
• foster research
• publish original work
• undertake and promote the recording of sites visited
• publish or lodge studies or surveys in a repository for the use of students and other interested persons
• selectively lobby for heritage issues

For more information about the Society:

Leave a message on VOICELINK 088 122 6771
Address: PO Box 15347, Vlaeberg, 8018
Email: vassa1@hotmail.com
Web Page: www.vassa.org.za
PREFACE

The year 2004 marked the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa. In 1964, James Walton, the historian and enthusiastic recorder of the indigenous and vernacular architecture of South Africa, and Dr Barrie Biermann, the Natal-based architectural historian and academic, addressed a Summer School at the University of Cape Town and inspired an interested group of people to start the Society in Cape Town. The Society’s aim was to visit, record and highlight the plight of the rapidly disappearing vernacular architecture of South Africa. The proud achievement of the ‘Vernacs’ is that over the past forty years they have identified, measured-up and photographed a built landscape that, regrettably, is still vanishing as abandoned structures dissolve back into the earth, or are heedlessly flattened by bulldozers.

This exhibition celebrates both the anniversary of the Society and the folk architecture that brought it into existence. Based in the Western Cape, most of the activities of VASSA have focused on the architecture of this region. The exhibition traces the vernacular architecture tradition of the Western Cape through the links that exist between need, available materials and indigenous building knowledge, and locates the buildings within the landscape, both natural and man-made, to demonstrate the remarkable synergy that exists between form, materials and location.

The exhibition concentrates on the vernacular architectural tradition of the Western Cape, but James Walton also studied the indigenous vernacular architecture of many other parts of Southern Africa, recording community and regional adaptations and variants. The existence of this rich but fragile heritage is equally threatened by the march of time and changing circumstances. The painted ‘white–faced’ rondavels of the Xhosa are as rare as the exquisitely woven beehive dwellings of the Zulu, and the intricately patterned Ndebele houses of Gauteng vanish as surely as the pioneer dwellings alongside them. The simple fishermen’s cottages of the West Coast and the humble farmhouses of the Boland are engulfed in the aggrandising aspirations of new owners.

The threats to our folk architectural tradition are more strongly felt than ever before, and the call made by James Walton remains as true in 2004 as it was in 1964. Our nation’s architectural heritage is rich and multi-layered and needs to be sustained and preserved through an understanding of the buildings and their construction methods, the surrounding cultural landscape, and the social and political forces that brought them into existence.

Now is the moment; there is no time to lose!

*André van Graan*
*VASSA Chairman*
THE ‘VERNACS’
INTRODUCING A CURIOUS CROWD

Yes, they certainly are a most curious crowd, all these inquisitive people who call themselves ‘Vernacs’. Who revel in travelling hundreds of miles to get their cars and their shoes full of mud. Who climb up steep attic stairs, get soot in their eyes looking up kitchen chimneys, who crane their necks photographing gables, who over-stretch their legs pacing up and down farmyards for rough measured plans. Who try their best Afrikaans to interview people in fishing or mission villages.

What is it about these cottages, stables, chicken coops, water-mills, threshing floors, about these clay walls, weathered thatch roofs, cracked window panes that is so fascinating to these few hundred people? An American by the name of Bernard Rudofsky was among the first to realise how the ‘vernacular’ or folk architecture of countries around the world can have more to say about the people ‘on the ground’ than the work of professional designers, and how it often displays at least as much ingenuity as the work of the best engineers. In 1964 Rudofsky curated an epoch-making photographic exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art, and for its title coined the apt expression ‘Architecture without Architects’. He also produced a book with the same title. It illustrates hanging, floating, dyke, cave and pit villages, water wheels, towers for fortification or grain-storage, cities for the dead. Is it our nostalgia, in the age of technology, for ‘the good old days’? For an era in which, with locally available materials, simple village builders could without fail arrive at the perfect solution for a given situation and function?

And was it coincidence that in the same year, 1964, now over forty years ago, a group of people attending a series of UCT summer-school lectures decided to form a Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa? Inspired by James Walton, a Yorkshireman who had studied this subject wherever he went, the ‘Vernacs’ - now also known as VASSA - soon attracted a good following both of architects and from the interested public keen to attend a steady flow of talks - always at the Athenaeum in Newlands - and join well-prepared excursions to explore and record places like Verlorenvlei, Gamkaskloof, Genadendal, Waenhuiskrans, Coenradenberg, Stormsvlei, often resulting in authoritative publications.

James Walton is no longer with us, but several of the other original Vernackers are still around and are among the contributors to this exhibition. But the general membership is now into its second and third generation and is as active and as curious as the first lot. And always keen to welcome equally new members provided they are curious!
THE VERNACS’ Antonia Malan tells the story of Good Hope, Simondium, in front of the cellar, with Simonsberg in the far background (Photo Willem Malherbe)
NESTLED IN NATURE
THE VERNACULAR CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

In the description of man’s environment a much-used concept nowadays is that of the ‘cultural landscape’. It refers to the imprint imposed by human habitation and cultivation on the natural landscape. Together, the two produce the actual appearance of the countryside - and townscape - that we inhabit and that can make such fascinating ‘reading’ to its informed user and observer. In those parts of the world that have been intensively cultivated since time immemorial, the cultural and the natural components have in places become inextricably interwoven. River-, coast- or mountain-hugging settlements, boundary hedges, winding country roads, contour cultivation, villages all seem to have grown naturally from the soil - and in a way indeed have.

The Cape was inhabited many thousands of years before Western settlement. But because of the mostly nomadic lifestyle of its earlier inhabitants, the lasting visible impact of man on this land goes back little more than three, in vast tracts of it not more than two centuries. The interaction of the two layers of the landscape is no less fascinating for it. Having had less time to do so, they can still be seen at work coalescing.

The Cape is fortunate in retaining many almost unspoilt rural cultural landscapes. The low population density in vast tracts, its distances, its prominent geographical determinants like semi-deserts and mountain ranges, have all helped to preserve the strong local character of environments like the Bovlei, the Sandveld, the Duineveld, the Hantam, the Little Karoo, the Bokkeveld, the Langkloof, the Hoeko, the Onder-Kouga. A full analysis of their fabric and the interaction of their natural and cultural layers are most worthwhile exercises that have been undertaken in only a few cases.

In the Cape, with its seasonal, and often far from abundant, rainfall, rivers and mountain streams play an indispensable role in the formation of the agricultural landscape. While almost every hectare of the land - including its mountains - belongs to one farm or another, the homesteads are almost invariably arranged along watercourses, mostly facing them. These may be larger rivers - the Eerste River, the Berg River, the Breede River - with their strings of homesteads. Or they may lie deeper into the mountainsides, along smaller tributaries. Isolated mountains like the Groenberg, the Paardeberg, the Paarl Mountain are surrounded by rings of farmsteads at their feet. Valleys like the Bovlei and the Blouvlei behind Wellington, or Jonkershoek and Ida’s Valley near Stellenbosch, the Hex River valley and the Ceres basin all boast well-watered concentrations of farms and homesteads, many of them of considerable age.

The farmers of two centuries ago were well aware of the potential for meaningful cultural landscape overlaid on the natural landscape. Their opstalle and werwe were usually visible from afar, their position articulated by avenues of approach, homesteads and outbuildings symmetrically arranged around forecourts and enclosed by werf walls, hedgerows, water furrows, slightly later small plaasdamme.

Different from the mother countries, towns and villages did not play a great part in the early cultural landscape. They seldom ‘crystallized’ from the rural landscape but were ‘planted’ where required, and laid out along geometrical lines.
NESTLED IN NATURE Cottages in the Cedarberg (Photo Willem Malherbe)

NESTLED IN NATURE Kromme Rhee, Stellenbosch (Photo Willem Malherbe)
CLARITY FROM CONFUSION
FORMALISING THE CAPE LANDSCAPE

In 1685 Commissioner-General Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein, on his way to the East to investigate corruption within the Dutch East India Company, called at the 33-year old settlement. On visiting the Company’s outpost at “Hottentot’s Holland” he found that *the way the houses, kraal and stables had been arranged, everything was in confusion*. Consequently, he laid down a landscaping policy that stipulated that the Company’s posts were to be planned according to the rules of mathematics and good building practice, also in order to inspire all freeburghers to plan their properties along similar lines.

The new post at Vergelegen was to serve as the first example of how such a post could be planned, and it was executed under the personal supervision of governor Simon van der Stel. Buildings were formally arranged around an octagonal farmyard with an orange grove divided into four equal beds bounded with rose hedges. The main axis of the house ran from the sea to the mountains and was flanked by orchards and vineyards in formal groves on either side of a broad walk lined with a triple row of camphor trees framing the view towards the sea. On the mountain side ran an avenue of mixed trees: chestnut, walnut, almond, fig and pomegranate, while oaks were planted between the camphors and the river.

Henceforth several other Company’s posts were laid out in a similar, formal way with buildings arranged either round a central courtyard or in other formal relationships to each other containing some of the elements of a Dutch 17th century ‘pleasure garden’, introduced by van Reede to the untamed Cape environment. By adopting the European elements of order, proportion and symmetry, small agricultural settlements could create spaces of significance in a landscape of often overpowering grandeur.

The precedent set by the Company was gradually followed by the freeburghers. Elements comprising the formal landscape remained part of the Cape environment well into the British period (19th century) and even beyond.

**Elements of the formal garden at the Cape**

Because of large distances, poor communications, generations-long changes, additions and overlays, many of the Europe-derived layout principles introduced by van Reede were not applied consistently (in the Netherlands, too, for that matter, they are not always evident in their pure form). But there are enough extant instances to be found, and others known from historical sources, to suggest that they did serve as an ideal to be striven for, if seldom fully consummated. They include the following:

- **Geometrically placed buildings and connecting and ring walls.** As buildings were added to a simple farmyard, the formal layout was respected - or indeed further formalised.
- **Axial approach.** The vista along the main approach, through the entrance gates, focusing on the main homestead (often gabled).
- **Tree-lined avenues and boundaries.** Oak and later pine avenues were always a feature of the Cape cultural landscape.
- **Ornamented entrance gates and trellis walks.** Due to a shortage of wood, the latter is seen only in more prosperous urban estates.
- **Clipped hedges.** Clipped laurel hedges up to six metres high, smaller hedges were of roses, quince, rosemary or sage.
- **Formal plantings of vineyards and orchards.** Arranged on either side of main paths; fruit trees in five-on-dice pattern (*quincunx*), occasionally in star patterns as was common in Europe.
- **Speelhuisjes.** Small summer houses for entertaining guests. Once probably quite common but only a few now remain, including at the 17th century Castle.
- **Water features.** A number of 18th century ornamental fountains are depicted by artists. What was probably the oldest (1707), at the Castle, was excavated and faithfully restored.
CLARITY FROM CONFUSION Vergelegen in Hottentots Holland: East elevation which looks towards the mountains; avenue of camphor trees at the top

CLARITY FROM CONFUSION Entrance gates, Nooitgedacht, Stellenbosch (Photo Willem Malherbe)
CUT DOWN TO SIZE
VAN REEDE’S INSTRUCTIONS

Commissioner Adriaan van Reede’s ten days long inspection of the VOC outposts at the Cape, on which he was accompanied by the local Commander Simon van der Stel, resulted in his momentous Instructie which, among many other observations and suggestions, stipulated how the Company’s posts should be laid out, as well as the establishment of the first inland settlers’ village, Stellenbosch. But van Reede also suggested construction principles that helped to form a new, uniform building style that, while related to that of farm complexes in Holland and neighbouring areas, was adapted to local circumstances and soon differed in many aspects.

Referring to van der Stel’s three-aisled barn at De Clapmuts with its massive roof, van Reede pointed out that by reducing the depth and roof span of buildings and increasing the height of the outer walls, beams could be made to rest directly on these walls instead of on the wooden struts dividing the aisles, thus simplifying construction. He also advocated the use of local materials like stone and mud plaster, for which unskilled labour could be employed, and the waterproofing of walls by the application of a layer of lime to the outside walls.

The building principles laid down by van Reede were closely followed and resulted in the typical qualities we have come to admire in Cape ‘Dutch’ architecture. It lies at the root of its uniform beam length and wing width and therefore its ‘domino’ configuration of wing added to wing; it resulted in its visual proportions of walls versus roof. The use of local material was to create a unique man-made landscape at the Cape, binding the architecture of the colonists - as did traditional African architecture - to the environment from which it grew.

It might therefore be justified to regard van Reede as the father of the traditional ‘Cape Dutch’ building style.
CUT DOWN TO SIZE Van Reede, author of the ‘Instructions’
OUT OF THE EARTH
THE LANGUAGE OF THE FABRIC

Looking carefully at old structures, one comes to understand the language of their materials and appreciate what they have to tell.

Walls of layered mud. Throughout the world the most primitive structures have been built of carefully prepared earth, whether this is friable black loam or yellow clay. At the Cape this building material was prepared in raised heaps or in pits where it would be trampled together with straw, manure and water by human feet or cattle hooves until it was soft and plastic. A new heap would be made daily and when each lot had been trampled and had fermented for seven days, it would be ready for building. The mortar could now be piled with a spade in layers of 45 cm wide by about 30 cm high to construct the full wall height, waiting for each layer to dry before adding the next.

Floors of earth. Prepared earth was also used for floors. A screed of 30 to 50 mm would be roughly laid down over a well-compacted base and then smoothly finished by pounding the surface with a stone. The ultimate finish would be of cow dung smeared onto the floor at weekly intervals, often with circular patterns (misvloer). When cows still grazed freely on natural fynbos, the manure often smelt pleasantly of herbs. Sometimes peach pips were laid into the mud or the surface finished with ox-blood to make the floors more durable.

Roofs of earth. Flat roofs (brakdakke) were often constructed of earth in low-rainfall areas where wood was scarce. The soil used was known as brak and was obtained from patches in the veld where water obviously did not penetrate easily. In pitched thatched roofs a mud layer or brandsolder was laid on the ceiling to protect the house from burning thatch.

Bricks. Brick making was one of the prime early activities of the first settlers at the Cape. As smaller, more compact building units bricks were easy to handle, especially at heights and for gables, and they enabled the construction of more complex building shapes like vaults and relieving arches over doors and windows. In 1658 a standard size was stipulated for bricks, namely 203 x 100 x 50 mm. These bricks were hand made in small wooden forms and although sometimes only sun-dried, thousands were fired in kilns along the beaches. In addition to the locally made bricks, thousands of small hard-baked Dutch ‘clinker’ bricks of 170 x 70 or 190 x 80 x 40 mm were imported from Holland as ballast on outward-bound ships. Whereas these klompies were usually either dark-red or ochre coloured, the colour of the locally made bricks varied according to the soil that was used to make them.

Stone. Stone – far more plentiful than in Holland - was often used in the construction of walls, especially their foundations, for buildings and kraals and was then plastered or could be left unplastered.

Mortar. Mortar made from earth was prepared in the same way as the material for layered walls. The earliest mortar was made from black friable soil, but from the beginning of the 19th century yellow clay was more popular. This factor is often helpful when material of walls and openings into them is to be dated.

Plaster. Although early buildings and farm outbuildings were often plastered with mud prepared in the same way as mortar, walls, especially for more prestigious buildings, were usually plastered with a lime-sand mixture.

Paint and limewash. The plastered walls of buildings were finished and made watertight by painting with limewash prepared by slaking lime, adding water and while boiling, adding linseed oil or tallow. The mixture was then thoroughly stirred before being applied to the walls. Often pigments were added to achieve a variation in the colour of buildings. Please note that the wood of doors and windows was seldom left unpainted.

Woodwork. The earliest wood used at the Cape was obtained from local forests, yellowwood being the most popular for construction purposes. But the Company also imported much Baltic deal for use in official buildings like the Castle. Poplar was introduced in the 17th century. It grew fast and was soon used in the construction of roofs and ceilings in country cottages. For ceilings, where yellowwood was too scarce to use for ceiling boards, an effective and attractive alternative was the spaansriet or reed ceiling (Arundo donax). It was primarily used in less-presentable rooms like kitchens, where centuries of smoke from the fireplace mellowed it to a dark brown.

Roofing material. The earliest roofs at the Cape were pitched and thatched with local reeds and this remained the roofing material of choice in rural communities until the introduction of corrugated iron around 1860 – and often later still. Where wood was scarce, as in the Karoo, the flower stalks of agaves were sometimes used for ceiling beams and flat roofs over them were finished with a layer of special earth known as brak.
OUT OF THE EARTH Cottage near Stanford, Overberg: sundried bricks eroded by rain faster than the mortar between (Photo Willem Malherbe)
HIGHER DIMENSIONS

DWELLINGS IN PLANS AND SECTIONS

Early Cape settlers brought with them memories and skills of building forms and techniques from their areas of origin: a long coastal strip extending from Flanders and the northern Netherlands through northwestern Germany and Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark. Simple rural dwellings from these areas can be grouped into

- **halled houses** in which a large central room was flanked by parallel ‘aisles’ somewhat like a Medieval cathedral with its nave and aisles, all covered by one wide roof or one slightly raised over the central space, with ‘lean-tos’ at the side; the entrance was typically set in the short end, and

- **longhouses** in which a row of rooms of constant depth and standard cross section is usually entered through the long side - and which can be indefinitely extended.

Longhouses were prevalent in medieval rural villages and existing ones are found in coastal northwestern Europe and also across the Channel. Though in the early decades of settlement at the Cape some ‘halled’ buildings were built (e.g. the four outbuildings at Vergelegen and one surviving shed at Meerlust), Cape rural buildings mostly belong to the longhouse type, with even the grandest farmhouses, with their T-, U- or H-shapes, evolving from multi-roomed longhouses.

One of the factors influencing settlers with limited building skills to opt for the ‘longhouse’ format was the ease of spanning the short, constant depth with a simple system of easily transportable lengths of timber. This was also one of the recommendations of Commissioner Van Reede.

Rafter couples carry purlins and their common rafters and thatching laths. Typically, wooden pegs are used to pin together the rafters where they cross over one another at the ridge, and where they meet the collar-beam halfway down. Moreover, the **brandsolder/loft floor rests on beams independent of the roof trusses, thus safeguarding the furniture below should the roof catch fire.**
HIGHER DIMENSIONS Detail of the inside of a roof that is being re-thatched
(Photo Willem Malherbe)
THE DOMINO EFFECT
HOW BUILDINGS COULD GROW

From a very early stage in the existence of the Cape colony, a comparatively elementary uniform building method characterized its domestic vernacular. Its basic element is a one-room or six-metres-or-so deep ‘cottage’, one or two rooms with a kitchen at the end, spanned by a thatch roof pitched at about 45 degrees. This standard dimension simplified the production and transportation of roof and ceiling timbers and their subsequent assembly. It also produced a building ‘idiom’ of great coherence.

In many cases the need would arise for such a ‘pioneer house’ to be extended to accommodate a growing family or express greater prosperity. While retaining the uniform six-metres roof span, this could easily be done in ‘domino’ (or ‘letter-of-the-alphabet’) fashion: lengthways to form a ‘longhouse’ - a ‘train’ of rooms - or, to produce a more compact house, backwards to form an L, U, T or TT plan, the kitchen almost always placed at the end of a back wing. The most ‘consummate’ plan developed when side wings were added to the back of the tail of a T-shaped house to produce the famous H-plan with its two façades presenting a ‘front’ also at the back. With its two parallel wings it was the closest thing to a grand block-shaped mansion, though achieved with the original six-metres wide thatch-roof wing construction.

But it is perhaps significant that nearly all parsonages and other important buildings were given a U-shape, where the sides appeared solid instead of the open sides of the H. Churches, too, could be constructed on the wing principle, with two such wings - only slightly wider and higher - crossing each other to produce the cruciform ‘pulpit church’ plan favoured by the Protestants in northwestern Europe.

With more sophisticated building methods, both the U- and the H-plan could indeed be turned into a block-shaped house when their open side- or back courts were walled off and given a flat roof; such houses were often raised to two storeys to produce grand residences such as Leeuwenhof, Vredenhof and Grosvenor House.

So strongly established did the uniform wing-type plan become that it was not until the mid-19th century that thatch roofs were constructed that could span more than one row of rooms, up to about ten metres, and could therefore accommodate enough rooms without resorting to wing-type extensions. Groot Constantia (circa 1792) was perhaps the first example, and there were a few other early cases where a ‘spine wall’ along the length of the house could support the ridge of the now much wider roof. But in towns like Montagu and Robertson these only became the norm in the 1850s. In more remote regions the six-metre wing-type remained in fashion until much later in the century.

The ‘double-deep’ houses can be recognized by their higher roofs and taller gables.
THE DOMINO EFFECT Verlorenvlei TT farmhouse (Photo Willem Malherbe)

(and see page 42)
COTTAGE TO CASTLE
THE DECORATIVE OVERLAY TO THE VERNACULAR

The little peasant longhouse or the T-shaped homestead nestling against a hillside, modest though it was in essence, could with little effort be endowed with greater dignity and status. Symmetrified, placed on a platform (or stoep) to be visible from afar, its outbuildings could be arranged to form an impressive forecourt, as well as given a perimeter wall hardly of use in keeping out marauders but rather serving to enhance the farmyard’s presence in the wide open landscape, a generous gateway set in the axis of forecourt and front door.

But the modest architecture itself, too, could be ‘overlaid’ with a variety of decorative features without losing its basic qualities. The most prominent of these was the front gable, rising to full roof height in the centre of the façade over the front door and giving the house – at least in part – the appearance of a double-storey. Its outline received ornamental plaster treatment according to the prevailing fashions of the time, following those of Europe: increasingly curvilinear scrolling (baroque/rococo) up to the 1790s, then in classical style with triangular pediments at the top, pilasters and other rectilinear elements. Other buildings of the farm complex were often also given such centre gables. It can be surmised that such up-to-date stylistic treatment was an expression of the owner’s acute awareness of the latest fashions despite the basic timelessness of the body of the house.

Other such enrichments could appear on the side- (or end-) gables (six on an H-shaped house), on the front door and its fanlight, on the small walls at the ends of the stoep, along loft steps, along the parapet walls of flat-roofed houses. The decorative overlays could be applied to the farm’s pigeon house, its graveyard, its slave bell (status symbols if ever there were).

The considered arrangement of the farm’s various building, its gables and other enrichments could - sometimes over several generations - turn the modest peasant dwelling into a mansion, and the status of its owner into that of landed nobility.
COTTAGE TO CASTLE Baardskeerdersbos cottage (above), Boschendal manor house (below)
(Photos Willem Malherbe)
THE INSIDE STORY
CAPE VERNACULAR INTERIORS

At the most basic level a house provides space to sleep and a place to prepare food. In a pioneer dwelling like Schreuderhuis (1709) cooking was initially done on a floor hearth, in the middle of a room without a ceiling, the rising smoke diffusing through the straw-covered roof.

Elaboration of the interior began with funnelling the smoke through a chimney, either built around the central fireplace or incorporated into a gable wall. Thus the kitchen moved to the end of the house and was given privacy by means of a screen or wall, in which case light and air were provided by a small window and a ‘stable-type’ back door. Provisions were stored in the loft – reached by a staircase within the kitchen, or outside – and in a pantry below the stairs, or close by.

Next to be partitioned was the sleeping area, which was divided into a bedroom and a living room. By extending the living room backwards a dining area was created which, when a decorative folding screen was inserted between the two, created an entrance hall (voorhuis) and dining room (galdery or agterhuis) where one or more fine cabinets formed a focus, or framed a view.

Moreover, bigger houses had a reception room – often the owner’s grand bedroom furnished with four-poster, armoire and dozens of chairs! Nevertheless,

“[The voorhuis] was the primary space where visitors absorbed the meanings, not only of the dwelling itself, but also of the whole free burgher way of life. The voorhuis was the place of shiny bright objects and their setting behind glass enhanced their value. Many cabinets were gabled like the house and carved like the front door.

Polished wood, porcelain, glass, brass, and silver in larger houses created an impression of wealth, order and cleanliness. Mirrors […] doubled it all […]

A clean, glossy display contradicted the oppressive VOC discourse in which time and time again connotations of dirt were attached to the person of the free burger farmer to accentuate his low status and otherness.”

THE INSIDE STORY Schreuderhuis, Stellenbosch; the later kitchen
THE SYMPHONIC STYLE
EARLY CAPE TOWNSCAPES

The Dutch settlement at the Cape was predominantly agrarian. Similarly, the Cape settler vernacular is in essence a rural building mode: farm dwellings, stables, sheds, volkshuisies, dovecotes. The Cape was never a land of towns or cities. By the end of the Dutch period, there were no more than eight concentrations, spread over an area the size of the United Kingdom, that could be called towns, villages or hamlets. Only Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Graaff-Reinet were properly laid-out towns with more than a few hundred inhabitants.

But during the 19th century, this vast territory, also further inland, came to be covered by a network of new settlements: six of them drostdy towns and far more numerous kerkdorpe to serve the administrative, commercial and spiritual needs of the increasing population.

In planning such new towns, surveyors employed the rational ‘grid-iron’ principle widely used by the Greeks and especially the Romans in their extensive colonies. The surveyors pegged out square or oblong street blocks, cut up into rectangular plots, offering buyers the choice between dry and irrigated erven. One or two blocks would be left open as market square or outspan.

This to us uninteresting ‘chequer-board’ layout was often ameliorated by local topography: winding rivers (always essential in the establishment of a town here) and valley slopes. It was also softened by the ‘third dimension’: the architectural ‘furnishing’ of such plans with dwellings in the current vernacular: streets and streets of thatched houses with gables and backwings like the farmhouses. Churches, parsonages, even drostdye were also erected in this idiom, making for streetscapes of great charm and a ‘symphonic’ quality.

In the many mission towns the grid system was not used. The possibility of subsistence farming offered to its inhabitants dictated that dwellings follow contours along irrigation furrows along valley slopes, leaving the riverbanks to be cultivated by the villagers.

Equally attractive and even more informal are some fishing villages composed of clusters of modest cottages among the dunes, without proclaimed streets and plots.
THE SYMPHONIC STYLE Worcester c. 1878
(Photo ex Morrison Collection)

THE SYMPHONIC STYLE Waenhuiskrans (Arniston) fishermen’s cottages
(Photo Willem Malherbe)
HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW
THE ELEMENTS OF DESTRUCTION

‘Acts of God’

From the start, buildings at the Cape suffered from the forces of nature such as rain, wind, veld fires, lightning and earthquakes:

Dramatically: when rooms were flooded and trees came crashing down on roofs; as thatch, woodwork and draperies ignited, or walls collapsed when everything convulsed.

Insidiously: when roofs started leaking and damp rose in walls; as timber became infested and rot set in, or molehills appeared overnight in earthen floors!

Thanks to pliant clay and thatch, however, damage could often be repaired or buildings altered and embellished with imagination and industry once again to shelter man or beast.
‘ACTS OF GOD’ Schoonderzicht, Tulbagh, after the 1969 earthquake (Photo Willem Malherbe)
HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

THE ELEMENTS OF DESTRUCTION

The sins of omission

Transgression of the principles of architectural morality can be of a lesser kind - by leaving undone those things that ought to be done to a building. These infringements can be ascribed to the common human frailties of negligence, ignorance or stupidity, often abetted by feigned or real poverty. Whether the violator is a private person, local council or the government, the building concerned falls in, burns down or slowly deteriorates to be vandalised and ruined.

Equally heinous is the sin of defacement whereby the surface, fabric or surroundings of a structure are insensitively altered through painting, plastering or brickwork - impairing authenticity and aesthetics.
SINS OF OMISSION Lower Vredenburgh front gable, smothered by PVA paint, collapsed in a heap of mud due to seepage through cracks (Photo Willem Malherbe)

SINS OF OMISSION Ouplaas: ruined through neglect (Photo Hans Fransen)
The sins of commission

Violation of the principles of architectural morality can also be committed by command, through instructions given by a person or body having authority over one or more buildings. The basic motivation for such action is irreverence, malice or greed.

Whether the sinner is an architect or planner, developer or politician, church official, soldier or discontent, the effect is the same: the sudden death of a building by bulldozer, and grievous harm to the soul of its inhabitants and admirers.
SINS OF COMMISSION Hans Fransen surveying Moravian Hill, before the demolition of District Six (Photo Willem Malherbe)

SINS OF COMMISSION District Six demolished (Photo Gawie Fagan)
IN THE NICK OF TIME
CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION

The moment of decision

Though buildings and their surroundings are exposed to dangers that may cause their gradual or sudden death, many of them do survive, and grow and may change their looks over time. Such changes, whether gradual and unnoticed or sudden and obvious, can damage but may also enhance its appearance. So can altering the function of a building.

Whatever the case, every change adds a bit of history to the building, making it more multi-layered and with it, sometimes, more noteworthy.

When, at an advanced stage of decay in the life of a building/complex, or due to an actual or looming catastrophe, it is decided to conserve or restore it, difficult questions arise such as:

- What stage of its history should be represented?
- Will not a series of stages give a better overview?
- Can and will the immediate environment be restored?
- Should modern methods and materials be used?
- Where will up-to-date amenities be placed (kitchen, bathrooms, garage); what style will be used for extensions; will they be visible or even obtrusive?
- What funds will be allowed for preceding research, compulsory or otherwise, on the actual restoration, on its possible proclamation as a Heritage Site, etc.?
- Which competent archaeologists, historians, architects, builders, applied artists should be consulted?

Answers to some of these questions will of necessity be subjective, as they are all based on aesthetic or moral values. Others may be less so, since much practical experience has been gained over the last few decades in restoration work thanks to contributions by increasing numbers of specialists.
MOMENT OF DECISION Near Robertson: John Rennie restoration with retention of later corrugated verandah (Photo Willem Malherbe)

MOMENT OF DECISION Rust en Vrede, Stellenbosch: old and modern cellar, the latter designed by Gawie Fagan (Photo Willem Malherbe)
IN THE NICK OF TIME
CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION

Pitfalls for the unwary

From the moment it becomes known that restoration is contemplated, objectors and opportunists may appear who can delay, damage or seize control of the plan. More beneficial delays may occur while compulsory archaeological investigations are carried out and Heritage Agency approval is awaited. Time may have to be set aside for obtaining, or reproducing, historical building components such as beams, frames and fixtures.

Schedules are likely to be adjusted because of significant finds: traces of old wallpaper, murals, mouldings and gables, or concealed steps, floors, cellars, wells and rubbish dumps. Less pleasant surprises can be the discovery of rotten beams, live ammunition or human remains!

Such important historical evidence can only survive if workers are alert and all building activity is constantly supervised by a wary overseer (a Clerk of Works or preferably an archaeologist in close contact with the presiding architect).
PITFALLS FOR THE UNWARY Clerk of Works, Mr Scribanti, supervising restoration of Rhenish Parsonage in Stellenbosch (Photo Willem Malherbe)
IN THE NICK OF TIME
CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION

After the operation

Patching holes, painting walls and woodwork or fixing a thatch roof are relatively mild conservation measures, not unlike a cure at a health resort. But restoration work entails a more thorough overhaul from which the ‘patient’ may, unfortunately, sometimes emerge with an unexpected appearance: cross-eyed, wrinkled, gaudy-complexioned or with a disproportionate gable ‘face’.

Even more regrettable are ‘complete facials’ (in which a damaged gable is simply knocked down and replaced with a new one) and ‘body transplants’ (in which, for instance, a famous complex was demolished in urban Cape Town and - incorrectly – ‘recreated’ in rural Franschhoek).

Clearly the direction and coordination of restoration work - in the words of the great architect Norman Eaton – “cannot be carried out in a purely sentimental or dilettante manner by just anyone who appears on the surface to know something about Cape Dutch architecture. To be at all worthwhile, it must be handled by one person who:

• is prepared to do the patient research work;
• knows intimately and cares deeply for old buildings;
• will insist on authenticity and historical correctness down to the smallest detail;
• will have the practical and supervisory experience to control the restoration workers;
• is prepared to keep his creative architectural urges under control and submit strictly to the evidence of what is likely to have existed;
• will always retain the initiative and stand firm against interference from whatever source that could cause deviation from the main objective.”
AFTER THE OPERATION Applying the final touches to the gable of Leipoldt House, Stellenbosch during restoration by The Cape Provincial Administration / Revel Fox & Partners (Photo Alice Mertens)
ROOTS
INFLUENCES AND PARALLELS

The ‘Cape Dutch’ style has been described as the most notable South African contribution to world culture. An isolated settler community not exceeding the population of a small Netherlands town managed to develop a style of building instantly recognizable, of great charm and consistency and, as all vernacular styles, entirely ‘fit to purpose’.

But unique and distinctive though the style may be, it is rooted in and has parallels with many vernacular styles in Europe and its spheres of influence in other parts of the world. The stout walls built of clay or soft brick and plastered both inside and out do not occur in the Netherlands with its fine hard brick, but is found in Mediterranean countries (adobe) and spread to the colonies. Next to the use of hard-baked pan-tiles, thatch is still much in evidence for the roofing of rural structures in the Netherlands and the adjoining coastal strip from Flanders to Denmark.

The most striking decorative feature at the Cape, the gable, appears in many parts of Europe, typically as roof termination, often with shapes clearly related to those of the Cape. In the cities, where the houses stand end-on to the street, they are often end-gables the full width of the narrow façades. But as centre gables they are nowhere as evident as at the Cape. Decorative gables are also found in other Dutch settlements overseas, notably in Curaçao and in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

Longhouses are found in many parts of Europe, very occasionally with wing development. But like the central gable, the almost universal ‘domino’ wing shape found at the Cape is a purely local phenomenon born from local circumstances (limitations of available materials and technical skills) and requirements.

Other than plastering skills etc., influences from the East (whence many slaves were brought to the Cape) are difficult to pinpoint. So are those from local sources, as KhoiSan matjieshuiise were too different in nature from what was required by the new settlers, who came face to face with black African people only by the time when their own vernacular was fully developed.
ROOTS Thatched and gabled farmhouse at Illmitz in the Burgenland, South of Vienna, Austria
Vernacular architecture of town and country forms an indispensable part of the ancestral inheritance of human beings, which we only hold in trust for future generations.

As our most highly visible links to past generations, these structures deserve to be treated with respect and understanding by:

- keeping them from harm, decay or loss with a view to their later use (conservation);
- setting apart their sites and ensuring their future protection (preservation);
- bringing back their dignity and beauty by repairing them and undoing unsuitable subsequent changes (restoration);
- ensuring a useful continued life, either in their original use or, with minimal adaptations, to a new use in keeping with their character.

The resulting dividends are considerable and manifold:

- The enrichment of heritage through the retention of these tangible links to our past.
- Intellectual satisfaction through examining and learning to understand historic buildings, their building methods and materials and their use.
- Acquiring a wider perspective of how Cape colonial and traditional African architecture form part both of an integrated local environment and of a world heritage;
- Spiritual enrichment from structures reflecting generation of religious fervour.
- Learning from the past by studying vernacular originals and the enhanced insight which this can provide to contemporary architects, enabling them to give more meaning to their designs and help them produce the perfect solution to local conditions and requirements;
- The educational effect on future generations: learning about their past by studying relics from that past;
- Commercial profit by returning old buildings to uses that have proved useful over the ages, or by recycling old buildings to new but sympathetic uses.
- Promoting cultural tourism by its period appeal and its markedly South African flavour in a variety of styles illustrating the country’s rich multi-cultural heritage.
- Job creation and skills training: restoration and maintenance of old buildings is labour intensive and requires specialised skills.
- Emotional satisfaction from enjoying the beauty of buildings: on their own, as groups, as part of the cultural landscape and, above all, as a setting for human life and activities.
A FUTURE FOR THE PAST Tulbagh after restoration (Photo Willem Malherbe)

A FUTURE FOR THE PAST Sheik Yussuf’s kramat at Faure with Hottentots Holland mountains behind (Photo Willem Malherbe)
JAMES WALTON
FATHER OF SOUTH AFRICAN VERNACULAR STUDIES

A founder member of various architectural societies, James Walton is regarded by our Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa (VASSA) as its spiritual father. Through his many publications, talks and his personal example he encouraged and assisted the study, recording and conservation of traditional (vernacular) building forms and methods.

James Walton (1911-1999) developed an interest in the vernacular when a youth in his native Yorkshire. Though he made his career in other fields, this active interest became a lifelong passion that resulted in detailed studies and the recording of traditional buildings in Europe, Africa and the Far East.

In England he became a founder member of the Vernacular Architecture Group (1952) and in 1964 was the founder (and later Life President) of VASSA.

Walton was the author of 11 books and over 200 papers, and was highly respected throughout the conservation fraternity as evidenced by the
- Award of Merit of the Cape Tercentenary Foundation;
- Cape Times Centenary Award;
- Architects Critics and Writers Award of the Institute of Architects;
- Gold Medal of the National Monuments Council;
- Gold Medal of the Simon van der Stel Foundation;
- Gold Medal of the Genootskap van Afrikaanse Volkskunde;
- Honorary Doctorate from the University of Natal.

Walton emigrated to Lesotho in 1947, where he was Deputy Director of Education until 1960. For his services he was awarded the Order of the British Empire. Moving to Cape Town, he became Managing Director of publishing house Longman Southern Africa until his retirement.

Although unilingual, this never deterred James Walton from travelling into the remotest parts of Southern Africa. He managed to communicate with the local people, even developing an interest in Afrikaans volkspele and boeremusiek.

Most appropriately Walton concluded his vernacular studies by publishing A Tribute to the Donkey, the material for which is housed, together with much of the fruits of his scholarship, in the archives of Stellenbosch University.
JAMES WALTON Cottages constructed of timber retrieved from shipwrecks were found in the century-old fishing village of Buffelsbaai, between Gansbaai and Struisbaai. James Walton is seen here with the owner of one such house, Sophie Swaam (Photo André Pretorius)
COUNTRY FRUITS
FORTY YEARS OF VASSA ACTIVITIES

“The objectives of the Society are to promote and encourage the study of South African vernacular architecture and its associated material culture by fostering research, arranging excursions and study tours, organizing lectures, the publication of original work and by any other means.”

James Walton had set out the objectives of the now forty-year-old Society very clearly and he encouraged members to study and record our disappearing fragile vernacular architectural heritage, and not only focus on the grand gabled farmhouses. Always mindful of these aims, the Society has been engaged in a number of projects over the years, researching and recording such buildings, particularly in rural areas.

This work is done in a holistic manner, with buildings ‘read’ in their context, both social and physical. So members measure up and photograph buildings and their interiors, and then relate these to searches in the Deeds Office and the Archives, piecing together an understanding of our vernacular buildings. This may even entail tracing, detective fashion, the ownership of properties from generation to generation though family genealogies.

The projects undertaken by the Vernacs have included many threatened buildings and settlements, and sometimes our records are the only evidence that remains of once-flourishing farms or humble cottages. Among such projects over the years, highlighting a few will illustrate the range of our concerns. Many of the structures along the West coast have been threatened and vanished as a result of changing economic conditions and the drift of people to the cities, leaving the thatched earthen dwellings to slowly dissolve back into the landscape, their passing perhaps marked only by a solitary fruit tree or a tangle of overgrown roses.

The first major recording project was that of District Six in 1969, shortly before its residents were forcibly removed. The Society made recommendations for the preservation of worthwhile sections of its urban fabric, though sadly none of these were followed up by the Department of “Community Development”.

Another of the since-vanished groups of buildings that we recorded were the reed houses of Hopefield, showing a once-common construction method in a region where reeds were plentiful. Equally threatened are many settlements near urban areas that have become engulfed by development. The Society recorded and lobbied for the re-use of the old Dutch East India Company farm of Zandvliet at Faure near Somerset West. Today this Georgian homestead is but a shattered relic of its former beauty, with its vast enclosed werf now totally in ruins.

The farm complex at Coenradenberg is a marvellously comprehensive example of gabled farmhouse with its related outbuildings, still furnished in a wonderfully un-selfconscious way but not entirely safe. The recording of this complex resulted in a publication put out by the Society. The publications disseminating the results of several such recording projects now amount to quite a handsome collection. A more recent effort by a group of enthusiastic members was a survey of threatened farm buildings in the Bokkeveld, the findings of which were presented to the local community in the hope of raising awareness.

In 1999 the first of a bi-annual VASSA Journal was published, disseminating the results of research and recordings by our members on a more regular basis. These have gained a reputation for the quality both of its contents and of its presentation. In addition, the Society has an active Watchdog group that looks out for threats to our vernacular heritage, notifying the relevant authorities and acting as a pressure group.

Thus the Vernacular Architecture Society manages wonderfully to combine what gives pleasure to its members with coordinating, collecting and disseminating its results.
COUNTRY FRUITS Coenradenberg near Hopefield, surveyed and documented by VASSA members
(Photo Willem Malherbe)
MODELS TO ILLUSTRATE THE ‘DOMINO EFFECT’

These models were made by Tim Maggs to illustrate the ‘domino effect’ on early Cape buildings, where limited timber supplies restricted with width of the structures. For buildings to grow larger than the simple cottage (lower left), they could be made longer (e.g. the langhuis - top left), or have one or more wings added at right angles (e.g. the T and TT plans – centre). The addition of further wings produced more complex plans, such as the H and U shapes as well as combinations (top right).

Sources:
• Willemsrivier, Bokkeveld – cottage used by General Smuts as HQ during the SA War (1901-02), and TT plan;
• West Coast Sandveld – longhouse;
• Ouplaas, Bokkeveld – T plan;
• Matjesfontein, Bokkeveld – H plan;
• Tokai – H+U combination.
WORK BY LEARNERS FROM THE FRANK JOUBERT ART CENTRE, NEWLANDS
LOOKING AT VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Grade 11 Sculpture Project: Transforming the Cape gable

Grade 11 Ceramics Project: Using the gable as a decorative motif on a coil pot
Grade 10 History of Art Project: “Create a shelter for a small, imaginary creature or person, using material found around the home, with the proviso that nothing was to be bought.”