



VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA
UMBUTHO WEZAKHIWO ZEMVELI WASEMZANTSI AFRIKA
VOLKSBOUKUNDIGE VERENIGING VAN SUID-AFRIKA

PO Box 15347, Vlaeberg, 8018
Email: info@vassa.org.za
Website: www.vassa.org.za

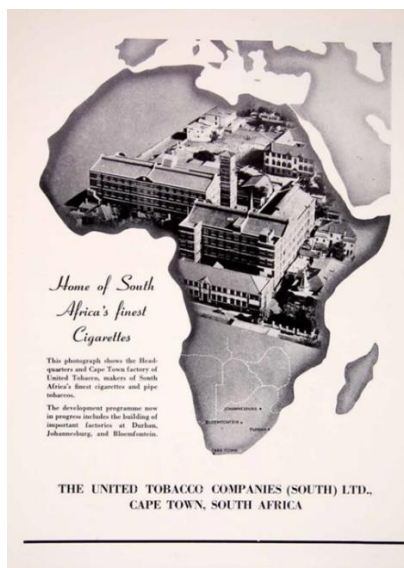
VASSA NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2026

FEBRUARY'S EVENTS

We started our new year's activities with a **Talk and Outing** presented and led by Pierre Swanepoel of dhk Architects, entitled 'Contemporary designs for the historical Longkloof Precinct'.

In 2024, dhk Architects successfully completed a 15-year long, adaptive reuse project at Longkloof Precinct in Gardens, Cape Town. The heritage buildings which make up the complex were originally the factory and administrative offices of the United Tobacco Company which started in 1904, with the first structure erected in 1905 designed by Jones & McWilliams. The factory was built on part of the grounds of the Nooitgedacht farm. A major addition was designed by the architects Parker & Forsyth in 1922. In 1940 the company is said to have employed 4000 workers in this factory!



Left: British American Tobacco advert. Right: The Longkloof precinct on Kloof Street. (Images supplied by dhk Architects.)

The project comprises the restoration, refurbishment and additions to five historic buildings and the construction of a new hotel for a leading global hotel operator, along with the creation of a large new publicly accessible urban square. The vision was driven by three core principles: unlock public life, retain and reuse valuable built fabric, and reconnect the precinct into its surrounding city. From the outset, the design acknowledged the existing urban character of the site, with five heritage buildings set in a fragmented precinct, and the challenge was to shape a coherent and legible urban environment.

Several significant heritage indicators informed the design and development decisions. In particular, new buildings needed to respect and not detract from the historic structures. The design team retained and adapted the historic buildings, while introducing two contemporary structures for the hotel that respond to scale, massing and materiality of their context. The new hotel sits alongside the historical buildings on a site characterised by extremely irregular, complex geometry unusual for a hotel.

The urban design response fully integrates all erven into one precinct to strengthen their connection to the surrounding city streets. A key move was the creation of five new pedestrian-friendly public spaces, including a central square that anchors the precinct. These human-scaled spaces establish a permeable, publicly accessible and car-free environment, activated by a dynamic mix of uses. Open spaces create pause points, accommodate day-night activity, and introduce new life into the area, enhancing the community and cultural exchange.

The project won several architectural and development awards in 2025, including Mixed Use Development of the Year and Overall Winner in the SAPOA Awards, Winner of the ClfA Awards, Best Mixed-Use/Precinct Development and Best New Hotel Development in the API Awards. It was also listed on the World Architecture Festival Buildings List in 2025.

For more information see <https://archello.com/project/longkloof-precinct>. Outing photographs © John Kramer.



Left: Vernacs gathered in Park Street, Pierre Swanepoel, pointing, on right. Right: Pedestrian access leads to the square inside the precinct.



Left: Repurposed school on the edge of open space. Right: New buildings adopt the red brick of the old BAT factory / Longkloof Studios.



Left: Arresting artwork in the hotel. Right: Busy and active pedestrian walkway with glass bridge between hotel wings.

After the walkabout at Longkloof, a small group of us walked down to the **Gardens** to view the memorial to the black soldiers who died during World War I. Adelaide Combrink gave a very interesting talk on the process which engaged many interested parties since 2010. A countrywide search was undertaken to find relatives of those represented in the memorial and four families actually managed to attend the inauguration. After a nationwide design competition, a firm from Durban was awarded the contract - and we have to state that the design is brilliant. Each pole is engraved with an individual's name and date of death. This memorial is both impactful to view and has something of a spiritual atmosphere. Princess Anne visited Cape Town to inaugurate the memorial.



The memorial.

The following text was extracted from www.capetownccid.org.

Dramatic in scale and vision, a new war memorial incorporating more than 1 600 individual wooden markers to honour fallen black soldiers who died for their country during WW1 has been erected in the Company's Garden in Cape Town. The poignant Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) memorial is set to redress historical mistakes and become a striking focal point in the iconic green lung of the Central City. The memorial salutes the South African Labour Units, who carried equipment, food, supplies and materials required by active troops. Also known as the Carrier Corps, they sacrificed their lives on the African continent but were never honoured in a fitting way. This has now changed.

The memorial has been installed on the lawns near the Iziko South African Museum on the quadrant next to Queen Victoria Street, and stretches south of the formal pathway, looking north towards the fishpond and the Delville Wood Memorial. A departure from usual memorials, the sensitivity and imagination behind its design led to Durban architecture firm Dean Jay Architects being selected as the unanimous winners of the competition for the proposed Cape Town memorial, beating more than 50 applicants across South Africa.

This unique monument forms part of remedial action after a Special Committee probe commissioned by the CWGC on the early history of the Imperial War Graves Commission. It found that, in some instances, the organisation erred in commemorating certain ethnic groups outside of Europe, or that casualties were commemorated unequally, not commemorated by name or possibly not commemorated at all. The project addresses and rebalances the errors of the past ensuring that the men who served are given the commemoration that they deserve. It is conservatively estimated that well over 100 000 men were deployed in East Africa alone.

With the memorial bearing the names of more than 1 600 South Africans, the CWGC hopes it will also become part of the rich artistic heritage of the War Graves Commission and South Africa. The monument has become a destination in and of itself and is an outstanding addition not only to the Company's Garden but also to the cultural landscape of the city.



Left: Adelaide telling the story (photo John Kramer). Right: The untiring group of Vernacs who walked down to the Company's Garden (photo Adelaide Combrink).



COFFEE AT THE VINE

Coffee at the Vine has moved from the little cottage (bothy) in the Gardens and is now located in the Iziko South African Museum, in a much larger space. You do not need to pay to enter the museum, just mention that you are going to the coffee shop. In a huge space, the shop has managed to maintain its eclectic character with an attached gift shop and cabinets of antiques for sale.

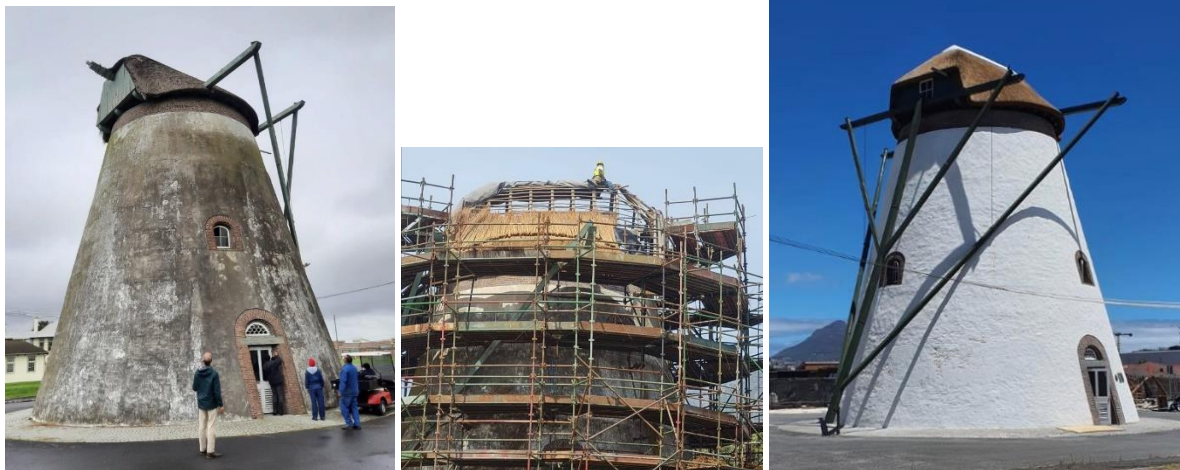
Incidentally "the vine" refers to the ancient grape vine in Heritage Square courtyard, where this coffee shop began.

NIEUWE MOLEN RENEWED

According to a report by Andy Selfe in *Windmill Hoppers*, after years of neglect, the tower of Nieuwe Molen inside Alexandra Hospital in Maitland, has been given a face-lift inside and out. The machinery was all removed over 100 years ago, and then it was made into a 'Place of Worship'. The mill was built in 1782, so it is older than Mostert's Mill, and is twice the size. Being in the grounds of a hospital, limited budget is better spent on patients than on an old mill, so once again, the Rupert family has funded the upgrade. This has included re-thatching, painting, repairs to the windows and doors, and removal of huge quantities of guano left by the birds that have called the mill home. It would be an exciting project to re-equip this mill. Unfortunately, access is and always will be very difficult. The top of the tower is much modified, but there are signs that the cap may have been 'well frame' supported on a central collar.

[Ed.] And once again the restoration work was under the guidance of John Wilson-Harris of Gabriel Fagan Architects.

The photographs were posted on *Windmill Hoppers*.



Before, during and after.



Interior views.

THE SKELETON OF A BANK

The 2026 Furniture Fair was recently held over three floors in the cavernous, half demolished space that was previously the offices of the Africa Bank, then Barclays and finally First National Bank at 81 St George's Mall. The building was designed by Milne & Sladdin and built in 1907. It is probably going to become another city hotel.

The imposing exterior, as described by John Rennie, consists of a granite base, brown sandstone ashlar and trim, red faggot brickwork, metal windows, prominent corner portico, stone columns, canopy and bronze doors. The interior is described as "fine" with marble, teak and bronze. All designed to create a feeling of wealth and stability to its clientele.

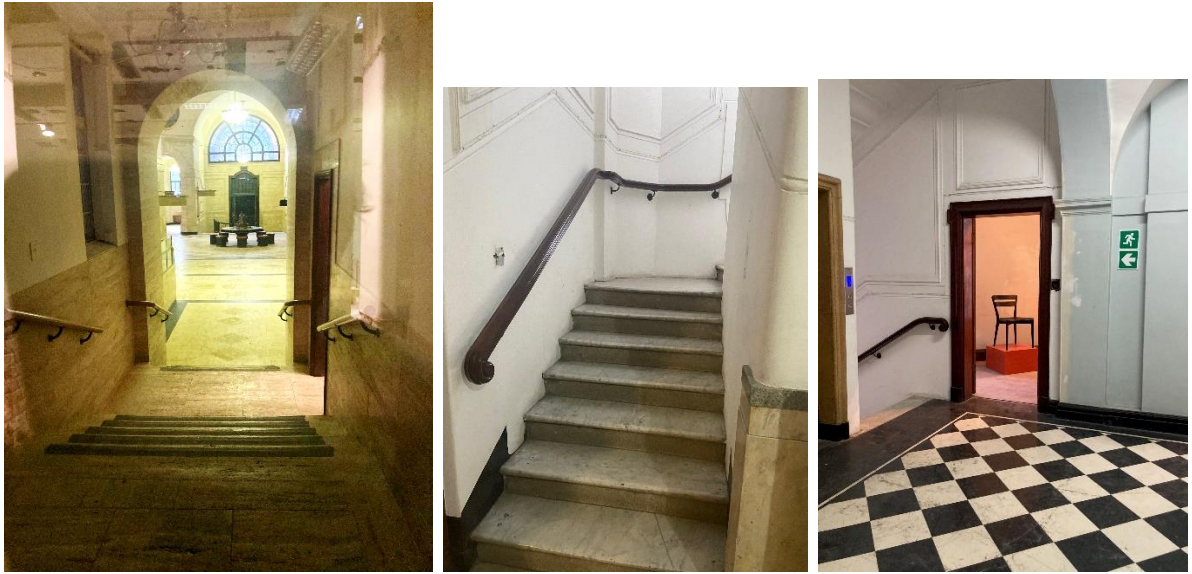
Here are a few photos by Pat Kramer of what is left of the "fine" interior.



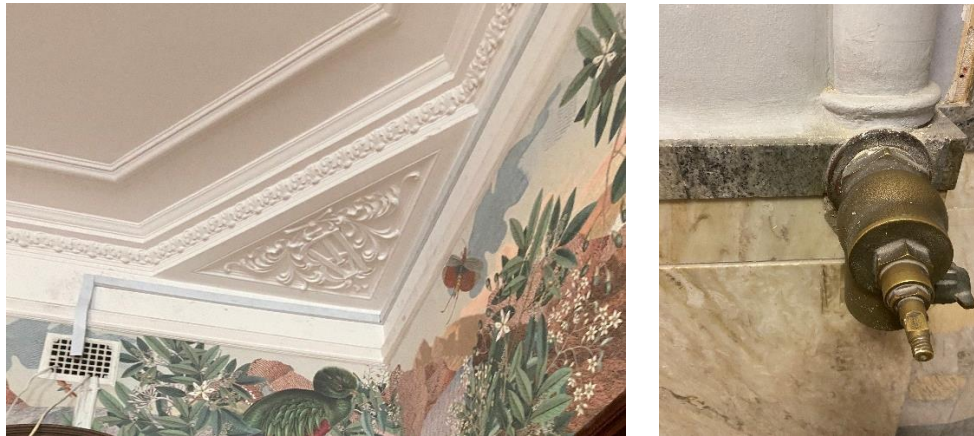
Left: Entrance to the old bank. Right: The skeleton remains intact.



Left & Centre: Period fire surrounds. Right: Lift doors.



Stairs lead the curious visitor inwards and upwards.



Left: Ceiling plasterwork. Right: Some fittings still remain.

WOODBIDGE ISLAND - NOT AN ISLAND AT ALL

These two photographs demonstrate the development of Woodbridge Island. The one taken in the mid-1960s shows a completely empty, sandy expanse with the lighthouse and only one building, Zonnekus, built on the shorefront by Sir David Graaff in 1929. Today it is a guesthouse.

Woodbridge Island was constructed during the late 1970s and early 1980s through a process of land reclamation involving dredged sand, engineered sea walls, and stabilised embankments. Technically, it is less an island than a man-made peninsula, connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway, but the surrounding water and controlled access reinforced its “island” identity from the outset. At the time of the development there were many objections regarding the destruction of the ecology and the wildlife that depended on it, as well as the unpredictable effects on the shoreline of Table Bay.

The architectural style of the buildings on Woodbridge Island is described by Vernon Chalmers as “Architecturally, early homes reflected late twentieth-century modernist and coastal styles, emphasising horizontal lines, large windows, and orientation toward the ocean and lagoon. The island’s layout prioritised vehicular circulation along the perimeter, with pedestrian access to the shoreline integrated into the design.” (<https://www.vernonchalmers.photography/2025/12/the-history-of-woodbridge-island.html>)

The island is also historically significant because of its role in the military defences during the South African War, with a wooden bridge built by British troops in 1901 connecting the island to the mainland as a defensive measure, hence the name. This bridge, a Provincial Heritage Site, was recently renovated and is now a pedestrian walkway.



Woodbridge Island. Left: 1960s. Right: Today.

ABRIE VISAGIE

ClfA Newsflash 27 February 2026



It is with deep regret that we announce the passing of Abrie Visagie, a respected engineer and widely recognised expert in the field of thatching.

Abrie was always generous in sharing his knowledge with colleagues in the architectural profession, and particularly with those in the heritage fraternity. His passion, expertise, and willingness to support others made him an invaluable contributor to the industry, and his passing leaves a significant void.

His generosity was exemplified by his recent donation of the roof structure, sprinkler system, and thatched roof to Mostert's Mill following its destruction in the 2021 fire. This act of kindness reflected his deep commitment to preserving South Africa's architectural heritage.

Abrie's warmth, kindness, and professional integrity will be remembered by all who had the privilege of working with and knowing him.

Abrie was a guest presenter at our recent (November 2025) VASSA Hands-On Workshop in Durbanville, and gave a colourful anecdotal and impressive professional lecture on thatching. A transcript of his recorded talk will be published in the Proceedings of the Workshop. Among other

things, he introduced his intended successor in the company. How sad that Abrie's retirement plans will not be fulfilled.



Abrie Visagie, second from left, listening to Len Raymond. With him at the Workshop are Vernacs Trevor Thorold, Janine de Waal and Nigel Amschwand.

THE ATHENAEUM – formerly La Rochelle, Newlands

[ED: Thank you to Joy Woodward for passing along this story, taken from notes to members of the Cape Horticultural Society who meet there regularly. For an anecdote by John Rennie about the Isaac family, caretakers at the Athenaeum in 1959, see page 4 of *The Early Days, 1960-1980* (VASSA 2024).]

Source: *The Athenaeum Newlands* by Margaret Cairns – 1980.

A firm Messrs Gibson Bros features in the estate accounts (MOOC 13/ 1/997 no 118-24.7.1901). No such business has been found in the directories but a Gibson and Co., General Merchants, Church St., Cape Town appears for that year; but there is no certainty that it was connected with Gibson. Whatever his business, it had proved a success even if the rents from his many cottages in Mowbray were an additional source of income. Unfortunately no complete inventory of his estate has survived.

Two years after Gibson's death the Newlands property was sold from his estate to Thomas Arnoldus Johannes Louw (1845–1909). Under Louw's ownership the name reverted to La Rochelle and this it retained until it became the Athenaeum in the 1950s. Louw died while on a visit to Germany in 1909 and his widow, Magdalena Maria Smuts, sold it after six years to Charles Fischer Smuts by Transfer 4281/14.7. 1915. The Louws had no family; possibly Smuts was a relative of the widow.

Four years later by Transfer 14081/ 1.2.1919 Smuts disposed of it to Alfred John Williams, again a short term of ownership, and in 1924 Williams sold to the Western Province Cricket Club (Transfer 3204/16.4.1924). In 1926 the Cricket Club decided that it was no longer necessary to retain the property and Henry Hepburn Bright and his sister-in-law, Dorothea Frances Bleek, took over in equal shares. (Transfer 8667/2.9.1926). Hepburn Bright was an erstwhile magistrate of Somerset West and Miss Dorothea Bleek was then the acknowledged authority on Bushman language and art. According to the *Dictionary of South African Biography* (Vol 1 pp80–82) her 'most productive years' were between 1923 and 1948, during most of which period she lived at La Rochelle.

PROFESSOR A J H GOODWIN

In 1947 after the deaths of her brother-in-law, Hepburn Bright and her sister Wilhelmine Henriette (born Bleek), his wife, negotiations between Miss Bleek and Mr Astley John Hilary Goodwin of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town resulted in the property being sold to Mr Goodwin at a price somewhat less than the estimated current market value. Miss Bleek was aware of the project to establish a trust to develop and preserve La Rochelle for cultural and limited social purposes. This was accomplished and the Athenaeum Trust came into being.

In 1948 the permanent members of the board of trustees were: Dr L.B. Goldschmidt, Mr A.J.H. Goodwin, Professor E. Newbery, Professor T. Price and Professor F. Walker. Through strenuous efforts the purchase price was eventually raised and Goodwin sold the property to the Trust in 1953 by Transfer 13563/1.9.1953. Considerable land was disposed of to provide funds and there were deductions for roads and other purposes, with a result that today a property much reduced in area from the original La Rochelle now remains as the Athenaeum.



THE ATHENAEUM TODAY (written in 1980)

In its role as a meeting-place and home for some thirty clubs, societies and professional institutes, the Athenaeum today has a warm place in the hearts of many Capetonians. Altered inside in 1967, it now has a handsome reception room, two lecture halls seating 60 and 180, a boardroom and a typist's office. A flat attached can accommodate a small family for regular supervision and for help for keeping society meetings running smoothly. Several thousand circulars leave the Athenaeum's office each month with invitations to meetings, minutes and society news. Air conditioning within, and spacious grounds outside, give an air of modest luxury that is a perfect setting for functions that range from orchid competitions to lectures by distinguished visitors to the Cape.

The Trust that runs the Athenaeum was first constituted in 1949, later becoming registered as a non-profit organization in terms of the Companies Act. The charges to societies for using the Athenaeum are moderate, especially for yearly bookings for regular meetings. Applications for bookings are considered by a Board of Directors, elected each year at a meeting of members and society representatives. With ample parking and a good situation close to transport routes, the Athenaeum has proved a successful centre for Cape societies. The fullness of its bookings-list is a tribute to this visionary development for a fine old building.

In 1968, important links were made with the Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa, a body with a large-scale, similar operation at Kelvin House in central Johannesburg. The

historic Athenaeum has had a fascinating past. Today, its many friends assure it a valuable future in the cultural life of the Cape.

DR. A.V. HALL Member of the Executive Board of the Athenaeum Trust.

FRAGMENTS OF EARLY BRISBANE

“Tens of thousands of artefacts were unearthed not by careful excavation but by the 2011 floods. Now, students are piecing together Queensland’s history.” This story is extracted from an article published by Joe Hinchliffe in *The Guardian*, 8 February 2026. For our readers who have taken part in a ceramics workshop or helped in the HARG lab at UCT, this will feel familiar – except for the blue gloves.

Several tens of thousands of artefacts were dislodged from under the street and began cascading past the convict-built Commissariat Store, one of Queensland’s oldest buildings. It was a race against time to salvage what archaeology they could. Faced with an overwhelming amount of material, the UQASU team salvaged the most unusual or noteworthy items, and those that gave insight to everyday life of the era – torpedo-shaped Hamilton bottles that, kept on their side, held carbonated liquids; a particularly ornate toilet seat. Given their violent dislocation from their resting place – which is a key source of archaeological information – the William Street objects hold little scientific value. They were acquired by the museum for more emotive reasons.

A young woman is engrossed in a puzzle. Only this puzzle comprises, perhaps, three different tableware sets, each almost (but not quite) identical to the other – and none likely to be complete. Frontier violence was waged in other parts the colony, but these fragments tell of a life more genteel. Intricate blue and white patterns on the plates depict a watery scene of pagodas, willows and swallows in a Chinese-inspired style that was “insanely common” on tea sets, platters and vases of the day.



Handling history: Queensland Museum is working with university archaeology students to help catalogue finds from early Brisbane, which were unearthed during the 2011 floods (Photograph: David Kelly/The Guardian).

Working beside Emily Totivan is fellow 19-year-old Elisha Kilderry, who has been passionate about the past since getting “really into dinosaurs” as a child. Kilderry studies genetics and archaeology, and hopes to use bone and genome analysis to reveal stories of human and biological evolution. In this

room, she is working with a different set of larger pieces of white ceramic shards, bearing a geometric design of viridian green. Initially, she imagined her career in archaeology would take her to Europe or to remote Indigenous cultural heritage digs in Australia. Instead, she finds herself sifting through what is known as the William Street assemblage, a collection of quotidian fragments from the 1870s, 80s and 90s – from clay pipes and rum bottles to ceramic dolls and a bone toothbrush.

Some of the artefacts are relatable to these students, others are very much of their era. As the object before Kilderry takes shape, we see it has a narrower base that curves out to a wide, open rim. “This is definitely a chamberpot,” she says.



Undecorated whiteware.

Brisbane is on the brink of something of a boom in what is known as salvage archaeology, as the city prepares to host the 2032 Olympics. Vast quantities of soil will be dug up to make way for new infrastructure – including a proposed 63,000-seat stadium on the site of a park that is heritage listed, in part, due to its rich Indigenous, colonial and multicultural history.

EXPLORING AFRICAN VERNACULAR HUTS: Weaving as a Climatic and Social Architecture

The following text is extracted from an article by Paul Yakubu published in *Archi Daily* on 26 January 2024. The images are taken from other sources, as noted.

Weaving is not only a technical craft but also a way to design material experiences. In architecture, the construction mechanism of weaving centres the shelter to the building process. Additionally, weaving offers numerous environmental and social benefits by creating shelters that actively engage with materials, tools, technologies, and creative potentials, thereby supporting placemaking.

The round hut is a significant feature in many African cultures. It reflects the natural circular rhythm of indigenous cultures, where social gatherings and councils were held in circles around a focal point. Weaving creates a continuous surface for the hut, blurring the distinction between walls and roofs. The intricate use of weaving also serves as a social infrastructure, bringing together communal techniques in the construction process and adapting the hut to the local climate.

Through the art of weaving, these vernacular dwellings embody a harmonious blend of craftsmanship, functionality, and aesthetic beauty.

In the Rift Valley Mountains of Southern Ethiopia, the Dorze people are renowned for their skill in splitting and weaving bamboo. They utilize this technique in various aspects of their lives, such as

constructing fences, baskets, and storage pots coated with clay. However, their most notable application of bamboo weaving is in the creation of entire houses. The bamboo is not used in its original round form; instead, it is split, flattened, and its pith is removed. This process renders the bamboo pieces flexible enough to be woven between uprights, which are then set into the ground. As the height of the hut increases, additional pieces are gradually added. Eventually, the builder starts to pull the pieces inward and weaves rings of decreasing size until they are finally closed with a separate crown woven on the ground. The houses are built to be over seven metres high, allowing for gradual shrinkage as rot and termites eat away at the base. The main doorway between the porch and the house is also very tall for the same reason. The door and porch of the huts are rewoven every few years, constantly bringing builders and craftsmen to interact with the techniques and intricacies of the material.



Dorze huts (africanscolumn.com)

In the valleys of the Richtersveld desert, you can still find traditional Nama settlements where their vernacular houses can be seen. These houses are round-shaped huts with a dome, constructed using branches and covered with woven reed mats. Originally designed for the nomadic lifestyle of the Nama people, these homes are lightweight and easy to dismantle and rebuild in a new location when resources in an area become scarce. The woven reeds are made in panels of various sizes for convenient transportation and coupling. To construct these huts, structural branches are inserted into holes drilled into the ground to create a circular base. Then, the branches are assembled in a honeycomb shape. Between 20 and 40 woven mats are used per hut. The woven mats allow light and

ventilation to pass through, and in case of rare rainy days, the stems of the porous mats absorb water and swell, keeping the inside of the hut dry. During winter, the interior walls are covered with animal skins for additional insulation. Women prepare the mats using river reeds, collecting and drying them in the sun. They then cut them to the desired length and weave them into mats using handmade rope. Men gather the branches, remove the thorns, and then pass them through fire to fold and bend them into the desired shape.



Women building a traditional *matjieshuis* (www.roxannereid.co.za, photo: Pieter van Wyk).

The traditional Zulu beehive huts are known as *iQukwane*. To construct them, a frame is first created around a circular profile, with wooden poles bent inward toward the centre. The frame is then covered by weaving a thatch of dried grasses, resulting in a dome-shaped structure. A grid of ropes is added from the apex point to the hut's surface, supporting the woven thatch and contributing to the unique architectural character that defines the identity of these vernacular homes. The construction process encouraged social interaction. Men were responsible for collecting the outer sticks and arranging them in a circular pattern on the ground. They would then weave a structural pattern towards the apex, taking into consideration the size of the hut. On the other hand, women played a role in binding and thatching the structure using braided split reeds and grass. Additionally, a central tree trunk provided support for the hut. The door was intentionally made low to regulate the interior climate and control the entry of individuals into the space. These huts are highly stable and provide warmth in winter and coolness in summer. Smoke from the fire escapes through the door or the thatch, which has the effect of constantly fumigating the hut.



The replica Zulu Hut at the Voortrekker Monument (Wikimedia, Ossewa 2014).

GAYLE O'CONNOR

Sad news indeed for those Vernackers who join our annual away weekends - we have learnt that Gayle O'Connor passed away some months ago - in fact, very shortly after our away weekend last year. Gayle was a very unassuming person, but always ready with a smile and joke - even when, I suspect, he probably was not feeling great. He covered Gigi's car with yellow vinyl because she was unable to locate it in parking garages!

Here is Gigi's letter to André:

My husband Gayle died on the 30th October 2025, just a month after the beautiful outing with the Vernacs. Gayle had a bone marrow transplant in 2005 and therefore had another 20 good years, and among others getting to know his grandchildren. He wasn't producing healthy red blood cells anymore and had heart problems therefore he decided to not continue a life without life quality.

Gayle loved the Vernacular outings and the interesting people we met. Apart from going to Europe every year he preferred pottering around on the farm but those Vernacs excursions he didn't want to miss. Therefore a BIG THANK YOU to the organizers and the lovely people, you gave him joy.

Alas I will herewith resign but am very grateful for what this organisation has meant to us both.

Keep on with your commendable work. Kindest regards to everyone, especially to Pat who always reserved two seats for us.

Very best wishes from yours, Gigi.

