



VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA
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VASSA NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2026

AUGUST EVENTS

The **Talk on District One**, *Mapping memories of an erased space in a transforming post-apartheid city*, was presented by Mishkah Collier, who is an architect and heritage practitioner from Cape Town. She started her career in the private sector, first as an architect and later transitioning to the heritage sector. Mishkah is currently working at the City of Cape Town in the Heritage Metro office, on a range of strategic heritage policy matters throughout the metropolitan area. Her Master's thesis on District One can be found at <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/37057>. This study, inspired by stories from her family, draws substantially from interviews with dispossessed former residents and various historic maps and aerial images.

District One, like the better-known District Six, is an urban landscape of displacement in Cape Town. It was centrally located northwest of Buitengracht Street - the historic demarcation of the inner core of the city - nestled between Bo-Kaap, Green Point and the old harbour's edge along its north-eastern boundary.



District One in the late 19th century (Michael Fortune Collection).

The **Outing** was a walking tour of the portion of District One below Somerset Road and the older portion of the area now known as De Waterkant. We were shown the remaining streets, alleys, walls

and buildings that survived the demolitions, removals, gentrification and commercialisation of the area. It was once very mixed, with a cosmopolitan character typical of ports. The Sacred Heart Catholic Church, facades of wine and brandy merchants now the Cape Quarter, Cobern and Napier streets, the Prestwich Primary School, stone walls once enclosing cemeteries, the Lion pub, Vasco da Gama Tavern, and the Vos Street Mosque. And the invisible, intangible memories of railway employees' wooden houses, unmarked burial grounds, coopers' yards and Dekenah's dairy.



Left: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Centre: Prestwich Primary School. Right: Vos Street Mosque.

We are very proud to announce!

GOLD MEDAL OF DISTINCTION

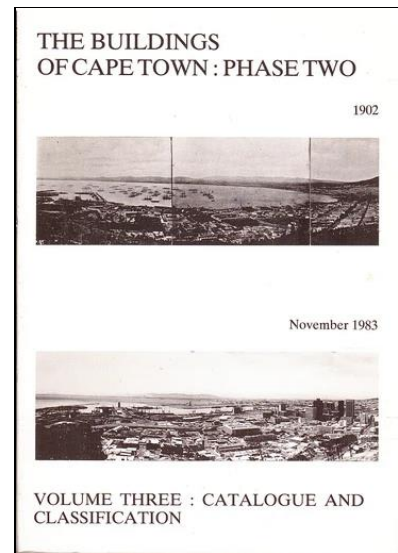
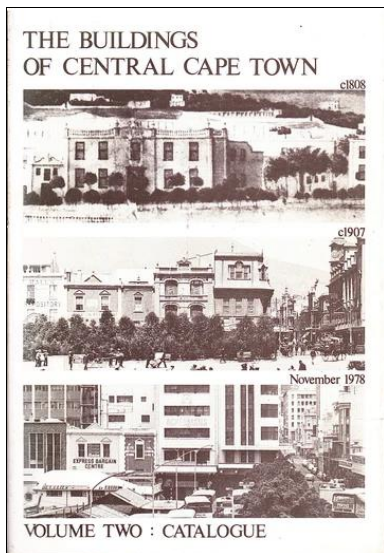
presented by the South African Institute of Architects to John William Linsingen Rennie

Over more than five decades, John Rennie has been a pioneering force in the field of architectural conservation, bringing exceptional rigour, scholarship and meticulous attention to the understanding, recording and protection of South Africa's historic buildings and places. Following postgraduate studies in Conservation at the University of York, Rennie introduced rigorous fabric-level analysis and international conservation principles to South African practice. His work has helped establish a more scholarly and authentic approach to heritage conservation, grounded in careful research, documentation and respect for the historic fabric of buildings and precincts. His landmark 1978 *Buildings of Central Cape Town* survey remains an essential reference for heritage practitioners and has made a lasting contribution to the understanding and conservation of the city's architectural heritage. Through his practice, teaching and mentorship, he has further influenced generations of architects and conservation professionals.

A committed educator, scholar and professional leader, Rennie has served the architectural and heritage community through numerous professional and cultural organisations. His contribution has been recognised through the Simon van der Stel Gold Medal and the Molteno Gold Medal, among other honours. His enduring legacy lies not only in the buildings and precincts he has helped protect, but in the rigorous methods, knowledge and professional values he has passed on to successive generations of practitioners.

The SAIA Gold Medal of Distinction is awarded to John Rennie in recognition of an outstanding and lasting contribution to architectural conservation, heritage practice, education and the protection of South Africa's built environment.

PRESIDENT | Arch. Monique Gillespie - 27 August 2026



Left & Right: Rennie's surveys of Cape Town buildings. Centre: The medal and pin (photograph via Avis Fisher).

IN MEMORIAM: HELEN ROBINSON (1930-2026)

VASSA member Sigi Howes told us of the passing of Helen Robinson, a good friend to the Society who gave memorable, vivacious talks and led us on outings through the streets of Wynberg.



Sigi Howes

10 hours ago · 🧑

Goodbye Helen

Yesterday my friend, Dr Helen Robinson, slipped into eternity. She passed peacefully sitting in her chair, in front of the computer, exactly how she would have wanted to go. She was 96 but of sound mind, good humour and still great company.

She wore many mantles in her long life: teacher, actress, director, historian and writer: a truly multi-talented inspiration. But it is probably in her capacity as Wynberg's own personal historian that she really made her mark. It was also the theme of her PhD. And it is through this body of work that I got to know her. When I started to work in Wynberg and needed historical information, I was advised to consult Helen. She had incredible knowledge and a deep understanding of the history of the area and was always willing to share what she knew. We collaborated on many things and soon became friends. I am proud that she saw fit to mention me in one of her Wynberg books.

When I was a rookie researcher, I once asked her to show me the inner workings of the Deeds Office. Like many Government institutions, the Deeds Office is a mysterious and foreboding edifice. And so one fine morning we sallied forth. Soon we had a cornucopia of primary sources on farms and other places I was interested in on our table. We loosely divided them up between us and surged off. Well, she surged; I shuffled. After three hours she had done more than twice as much as what I had managed to do, and I learnt a quick and valuable lesson: never underestimate an older person!

And now she is gone, and she will be sorely missed. But we are grateful that she lived a full and productive life. And she has left us a rich legacy of knowledge, research and books. RIP, Helen. And as you pass from one world to the next, go and launch a thousand ships to make the journey really dramatic. [See less](#)



Dr Robinson began her professional life as a theatre practitioner and a lecturer in drama and communication. She settled in Wynberg 35 years ago and has pursued her interest in its multicultural heritage since that time. Her PhD thesis was published in 1998 with the title – *Beyond the City Limits – People and Property at Wynberg*. Her second book, entitled *Wynberg – A Special Place*, emphasizes the role which conservation has played, or failed to play, in preserving the heritage resources of Wynberg. Her other books include *Shakespeare at Maynardville* and *The Villages of the Liesbeeck*, which explores the role played by the river in the formation of the Southern Suburbs, as we know them today.

Helen with her books (Cape Town Historical Society FB).

GOOD NEWS ABOUT HIGHCLERE IN BLOUBERG!

This was posted on Jim Hislop's *Cape's Threatened Buildings* Facebook group by Hendrik Lamprecht, who is interested in restoration. John Rennie and VASSA recorded the cottage in 2012 while it was in bad repair but still standing. As part of the initiative to safeguard the cottage, VASSA members (including researcher Jim Hislop) compiled an extensive visual archive.



Sam McLennan and Joan Glennie sizing up Highclere Cottage (VASSA 27 April 2012).

Hendrik Lamprecht wrote:

"The Blue Peter Hotel has recently changed hands, and the best news is that the new owners, together with the managing company, have decided to renovate the entire premises — including Highclere. The hotel will remain more or less the same on the outside, but the interior will be upgraded. Highclere will be restored in accordance with heritage guidelines and will most likely be used as a restaurant thereafter.

Sadly, some of my comrades who were involved in the fight to prevent Highclere from being demolished — particularly Marie-Lou le Roux and Susan Starke — have since passed away and are therefore unable to celebrate this important milestone with us. I know they would have been immensely pleased to see this day.

Today, I was fortunate enough to be taken on a tour of the Blue Peter by the current manager, John Mhlanga, who was recently appointed. It is clear that he has already developed a genuine appreciation for the history and heritage of the place. I am currently putting together a collection of newspaper clippings and articles to help John better understand the history of the area and, in particular, the significance of Highclere. Having seen his enthusiasm and genuine interest first-hand, I am convinced that the future of Highclere and the Blue Peter is in safe hands with John at the helm.

After all the years of uncertainty and the fight to save this important piece of our heritage, this is truly wonderful news.”

REVITALISATION OF BLOEMFONTEIN’S KINGS PARK ROSE GARDEN

Do you remember the VASSA talk in July 2025, *Liteima – Captured in Time*, presented by Alex Robertson and Wally Peters? It was about traditional SeSotho mural art photographed on eastern Free State farms. This article by Hendrik Auret caught our eye as it refers to those unique designs being used for an unusual purpose. See [Rescripting colonial landscapes: the Prince’s Rose Garden in Bloemfontein](#) (*South African Journal of Art History*, 37(1), 2022).

In response to calls for removing or changing colonial monuments and spaces, this article looks at two creative design projects. These projects changed how we remember a colonial area by layering it with traditional geometric patterns (*Liteima*) from the Basotho people. Instead of just copying these indigenous designs for decoration, the projects challenged the deeper rules and thinking behind both Western and traditional design. Ultimately, Auret argues that decolonizing a landscape is an ongoing process of rewriting its history. By listening to ignored traditions and questioning standard design rules, we can create richer, more inclusive public spaces.



Liteima decorative motifs painted by Basotho women on their houses (photographs by Alex Robertson, 1978).

The historic Prince’s Rose Garden in Bloemfontein was a much-admired venue within King Edward VII Park and contributed to the settlement being nicknamed the City of Roses. However, despite hosting important historical events, the fortunes of the rose garden dwindled along with the larger park, due to growing levels of spatial fragmentation, commercialisation and neglect. In 2014 the last rose bushes were removed to host an international beach volleyball tournament.

Academics and architects from the University of the Free State (UFS) and community researchers initiated cultural and commemorative events in the park. One used temporary structures displaying *Litema* motifs alongside chalked outlines of the former rose beds to honour the site's heritage and spark community renewal. A major community-driven restoration project, spearheaded by the local NPO Anchor of Hope, cleaned up the park and planted 100 new rose beds. A grand reopening of the rose garden took place in February 2024.



Litema motifs marking the outline of the old rose beds (photographs by Christie-Ann Groenewald in Auret 2022: 28.)



Neglect and revival (*Bloemfontein Courant*).

NEW USE FOR OLD WIND TURBINE BLADES



Facts They Don't Teach You

1 September at 05:42 · ⚙️

A Swedish car park just gave 57 old wind-turbine blades a completely new life.

In Lund, Sweden, the Niels Bohr car park reused rotor blades from Vattenfall's decommissioned Nørre Økse Sø wind farm in Denmark.

Instead of sending the huge blades toward disposal, sections of them were cut and turned into non-load-bearing walls covering large parts of the car park's façade.

The blades are made from strong composite materials designed to withstand decades of wind, making them difficult to recycle using conventional methods.

So instead of treating them as waste, this project treated them as building material.

Vattenfall describes the project as the first car park of its kind in Europe.

It's a simple example of what the future of recycling could look like:

Don't just ask how to dispose of old materials.

Ask what else they can become.



Recycled wind turbine blades converted to clad a parking garage.

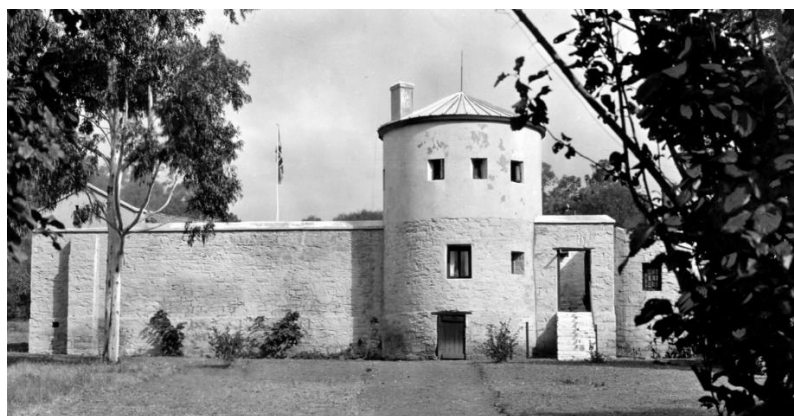
THE OLD PROVOST PRISON OF GRAHAMSTOWN

A recent investigation of the old Provost prison in Grahamstown led to a rarely used word - panopticon - and a rare building of this design. The Old Provost Military Prison in Grahamstown (Makhanda) is a rare example of British colonial panopticon architecture. This prison was designed for military discipline, but today it tells a deeper story about surveillance, power and colonial justice in the Eastern Cape.

British public buildings in the colonies were often built under the auspices of the military engineers, and this was the case with most military buildings. In 1836, the Governor of the Cape, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, gave instructions to the Royal Engineers to build a 'fortified barrack establishment' in the grounds of the Drostdy at Grahamstown. The provost building was hastily completed by January 1838 for the detention of 20 mutinous Khoikhoi of the Cape Corps from Fort Peddie.

Based on the plan devised by Jeremy Bentham for a Russian prince in 1787, the Provost was built on the panopticon system, whereby each window of the tower housing the guardroom and gaoler's quarters commanded a view of at least two of the eight cells fanning out from a yard below.

The Provost is a Provincial Monument. It has been renovated and is now a coffee shop. Archaeologists at the Albany Museum have carried out excavations in the vicinity which they are still working on, but needless to say, there are lots of military bits and pieces.



The Old Provost Military Prison.



The panopticon system in plan (left) and as built (right) (Rhodes University).



The Provost restored and providing a tea room (photographs Oat===Pat Krame March 2025).

RHODES MEMORIAL AND TEA ROOM

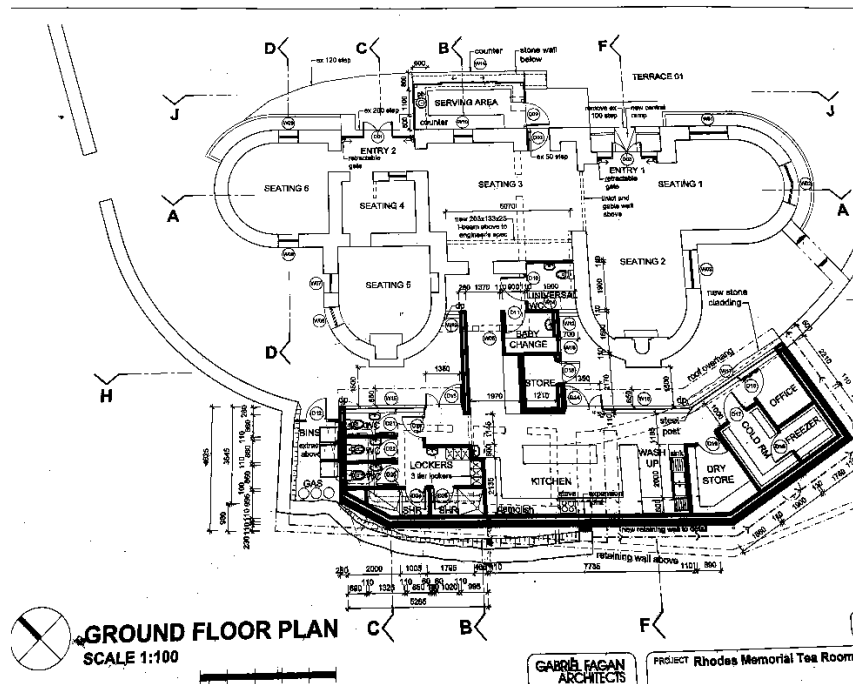
A visit to Rhodes Memorial for the first time since the catastrophic fire in 2021 resulted in good and sad thoughts. The saddest is the sorry state of the once popular Rhodes Memorial Tea Room. It looks as though the fire happened just yesterday - tables, garden benches and fountains still lying toppled on their sides. Quite eerie, actually. (Photographs John Kramer.)



Rhodes Tea Room site today (photograph John Kramer September 2026).

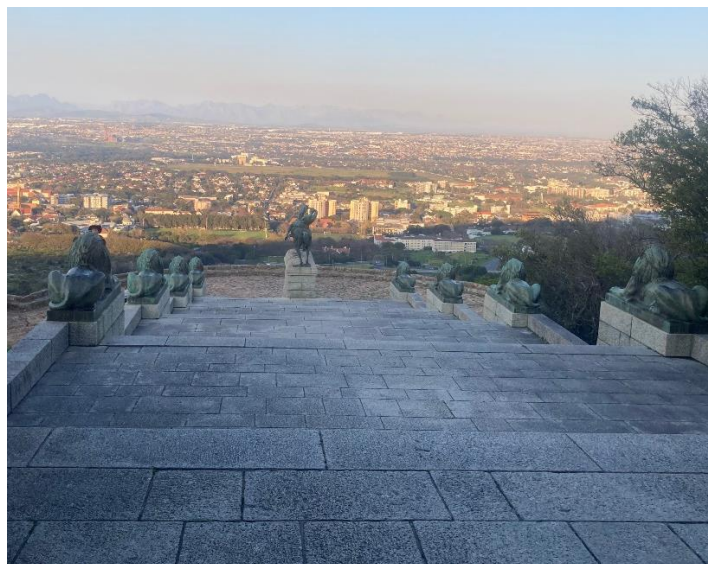
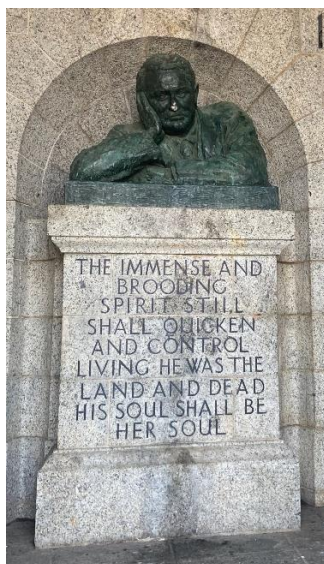
A plan for the redevelopment is posted on site and according to the architect John Wilson-Harris, the new tea room will try to capture the atmosphere of the original stone building. The big difference

will be a new building to the rear which will house the kitchen while the previous kitchen will now accommodate more guests.



Gabriel Fagan Architects reconstruction plan can be inspected on the site.

At the memorial itself, poor Rhodes still has no nose, but on the other hand, the destruction of all the trees by the fire has revealed a grand view across the Cape Flats to the mountains.



Left: Rhodes is still without a nose. Right: Uninterrupted view from Rhodes Memorial.

OLD THATCH SAVED

For years people have been watching the slow deterioration of the cottage called Old Thatch. It is just off Protea Road on Vineyard Road so visible to many passers-by. The good news is that it has been

sold and repairs and renovations have taken place. Most importantly, the sagging thatched roof has been replaced and looks splendid.



Old Thatch with sliding, sagging roof (Google Streetview).



As good as new (photographs by Alex Dodge, 16 September 2026.)

According to Hans Fransen in his book *The Old Houses of the Cape*, "This asymmetrical T-shaped cottage is one of the few remaining thatched houses in a fast-changing suburb - and certainly the best [in 1980!]. Its roof ends are hipped, that on the left half-hipped to allow for a loft door. The windows are all two panes high in the upper sash as against three in the lower, and belong to c.1860. There are extensive extensions at the back.

In recent publications the date has been given as c.1730, but Jim Hislop mentioned on Facebook that he thought the date was more likely to be around 1830. Someone then followed up with the comment that his wife had been told many years ago that the cottage was there when Vineyard Road was built and originally housed slaves and was called 'langhuis'. Jim's well-argued response was, "The cottage

isn't shown on the L.M. Thibault survey of the area dated c.1813 (and his maps were pretty comprehensive), but it is shown on a survey diagram dated 1848, so it still seems to me that it was probably built between 1813 and 1848). Yes, the front part does form a longhouse shape, but it looks like it was extended after 1848 (to form two identical units), when it was shown on the survey diagram as being a narrower building with a back wing. It may have housed freed slaves when it was first built, yes, and it does stand on a former portion of Sans Souci, as you said."

It is interesting how social media, such as Facebook, can add information and expose hitherto unknown facts about a place.

A VISIT TO THE CASTLE IS ALWAYS INTERESTING

A recent visit to the Castle of Good Hope led to a few interesting discoveries. One was the *Ceramic Journeys* exhibition. A wide and stimulating selection of ceramics ranging across the whole of our history, all beautifully displayed and lit. Amongst the more 'historic' pieces are works by modern South African potters, which makes for an arresting juxtaposition of ceramics over the centuries. The text in the box below was taken from a wall panel.



CERAMIC JOURNEYS

Trade networks stretched from the east coast of Africa across the Indian Ocean and into the African hinterland. By 1200 Mapungubwe at the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers was a centre of an African trading empire. Porcelain from China, such as celadon glazed ware as well as cloth and glass beads from India were imported and exchanged for gold, ivory and hides. Powerful chiefs were buried with their gold ornaments, reflecting their high status. By 1270 Mapungubwe had been displaced by Great Zimbabwe as the most powerful trading state in the region.

When the Dutch landed at the Cape in 1652 to set up a fortified refreshment station for the Dutch East India Company (VOC), they brought with them European ceramics of the period and small amounts of Chinese porcelain. Official VOC shipments of export Asian ceramics to the Cape began in 1666 with a small "consignment of Iranian (Persian) ceramics. Subsequent shipments included both Persian and Japanese ceramics, followed by the numerous consignments of Chinese porcelain beginning in 1678.

In 1668, Commander Zacharias Wagenaer wrote to the Company officials in Batavia asking them to send potters to the Cape 'as he was much in need of pottery'. Following this request, the first European-type coarse earthenware, now known as 'VOC earthenware', was produced in the Cape. However, until the early 1800s, most ceramics at the Cape were imported from China and to a lesser extent Japan. After the second British Occupation of the Cape in 1806 trade networks shifted and imported British ceramics dominated.

The term porcelain is derived from the Portuguese word *porcella*, which refers to the cowrie shell, as the appearance of the inside of the shell is similar to that of Chinese porcelain, of which the Portuguese were the principal importers during the 16th century. The Chinese were the first to produce porcelain.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRAGMENTS

Ceramics endure through time which makes them of particular importance to archaeologists as informative markers of the human past. Although often in fragments, the shape, ware and decorative motifs provide insights

into the cultural identity of their makers or users, show technical expertise, reveal gender and power, and give evidence of relationships and distribution across time and space, even connecting the word of the living and that of the ancestors.

In southern Africa two different traditions of pre-colonial pottery are known from the archaeological record, both dating to at least 2000 years ago. One is associated with the migration of herders, sometimes called Khoekhoe, while the other marks the arrival of early African agricultural farmers.

Fragments of pottery associated with herders are found mainly in rock shelters and open encampments, often associated with the bones of domestic sheep. This pottery is thin-walled and typically has a shell temper. Plain or decorated, these vessels tend to be oval in shape with a conical base and often with small perforated lugs on the shoulder or neck for attaching leather, twine or similar handles for carrying. This type of pottery was still being made in the south-western Cape when the Dutch settlers arrived in 1652 and shards have been found in association with European and Asian ceramics in the lowest layers of 17th-century VOC sites, including the Castle.

Most of the archaeological pottery in southern Africa was made by early African farmers. They cultivated sorghum and other crops, while also hunting and keeping cattle and sheep. After almost a thousand years in southern Africa, these small farming groups established a class-based society at Mapungubwe and later at Great Zimbabwe. Although trade lay at their power base, cattle were crucial in all aspects of life, and metal-working was also important. Smelting and forging were technically and symbolically linked to making and firing pottery, and both were symbolically linked with giving birth. Distinctions in styles of pottery have been interpreted to trace movements of people, social interaction and cultural affinities over time.



Left: The original lion sculpture. Right: The *tromp l'oeil* mural at the Watergate. (Photographs John Kramer)

One of the older exhibits which caught our attention was the two terracotta lions which are in exceptional condition considering they were out in the open on public display outside the Castle from the early 1700s until the end of the 20th century, when they were moved from the Castle gates to protect them. They are described as created in a style suggestive of being of South East Asian origin, though it is possible they were made at the Cape by Company or Asian masons and slaves. Today replicas meet visitors on arrival at the Castle gate. The exhibition was opened in 2012 which is an indication of how often locals visit the Castle!

Another intriguing discovery was the mural painted on the wall which blocks the Castle entrance to the sea. It has been well executed. This entrance was replaced by the present gated entry in 1682.

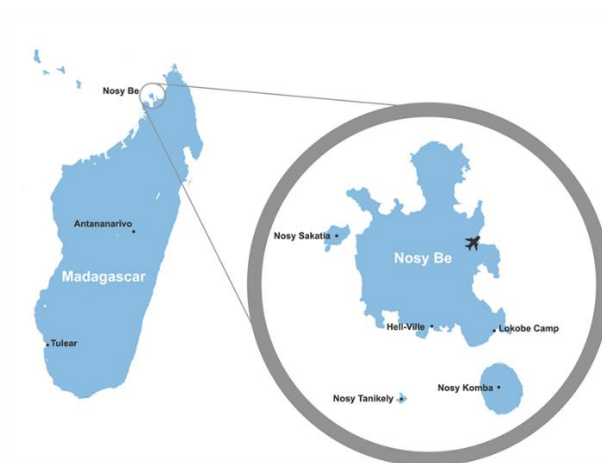
A VISIT TO THE NOSY BE ISLANDS, MADAGASCAR (June 2026) – PART 1

Stefan de Kock

Brief historical context

The history of Nosy Be ("Big Island") is closely associated with its strategic position within the western Indian Ocean and the movement of Arab, Indian and other maritime traders to the island from at least the 10th century. Early trading settlements developed along the coast, establishing Nosy Be as part of an extensive Indian Ocean trading network. Among the earliest and most significant of these was Mahilaka, which developed as an important trading port and centre for the exchange of goods including copal, iron, rock crystal, gold, spices, tortoiseshell and slaves.

Marodoka, formerly known as Ambanoro, represents one of the island's most important surviving historic settlements. The village developed as a Kiswahili-influenced trading settlement and was established or expanded through the arrival of Arab and Indian merchants, particularly from the 15th century onwards. By the 15th century, Ambanoro had become an important commercial centre, populated largely by Indian and Antalaotra traders and integrated into the wider maritime trading networks of the western Indian Ocean. The Sakalava are regarded as the indigenous population of the area and their interaction with successive Arab, Indian and other communities contributed to the distinctive cultural character of the settlement.



(Madagascar Island Safaris)

Today, Marodoka is largely in ruins and is sometimes referred to as the "Ghost Village". Nevertheless, the surviving buildings, ruins and cultural landmarks provide important evidence of Nosy Be's early history and the island's long-standing cultural and commercial connections with the Indian Ocean region. The remains include traditional and colonial-era structures incorporating Indian and Islamic influences, constructed in part from locally available coral stone.

Among the settlement's most significant landmarks is the first mosque, traditionally regarded as the site of the earliest mosque established in Madagascar. The Indian Cemetery provides further evidence of the generations of Indian and other foreign merchants who settled, traded and lived on the island. Another notable landmark is the ruined residence or estate associated with Karim Djikak, historically

regarded as one of Nosy Be's wealthiest merchants and popularly known as the "Ghost House". The ruins have become associated with local legends and folklore concerning spiritual protection.

Nosy Be's strategic importance also attracted European colonial interest. English attempts to establish a presence on the island were made in the 17th century, while France formally seized Nosy Be in 1842 and subsequently developed it as part of its colonial interests in Madagascar. This period introduced further architectural, cultural and economic influences that remain evident in parts of the island.

A significant transformation of Nosy Be's agricultural economy occurred in the early 20th century following the introduction of *ylang-ylang*, an aromatic tree originating in Southeast Asia. By the 1920s, cultivation and distillation of *ylang-ylang* oil had become an important component of the island's economy, contributing to Nosy Be's enduring reputation as the "Perfume Island".

The cultural landscape of Nosy Be therefore reflects several centuries of interaction between indigenous Sakalava traditions and successive Arab, Indian, Islamic and European influences. Marodoka is particularly important within this landscape, as its surviving ruins, mosque, cemetery, traditional settlement pattern and architectural remains provide tangible evidence of the island's role as a historic meeting place between Madagascar and the wider Indian Ocean world. The village and its surrounding cultural landscape also remain closely connected to living Sakalava traditions and provide an important setting for understanding the ancestral history and cultural identity of Nosy Be.



Vernacular streetscapes and beachscapes of Nosy Be.



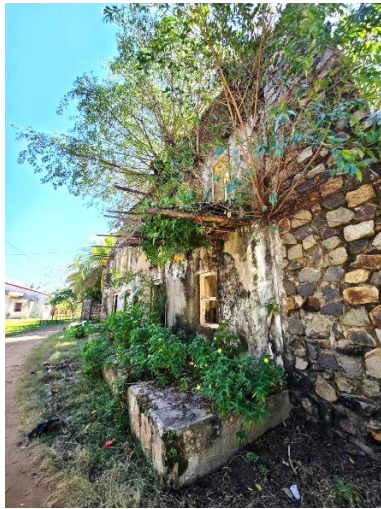
The traveller's tree (*Ravenala madagascariensis*), locally known as *ravinala*, is an essential building material for traditional Malagasy architecture, including in the region of Nosy Be and surrounding islands. Every part of the plant is utilised to create sustainable, locally sourced housing structures known traditionally as *trano falafa*.

Key architectural applications

- **Roofs (*Falafa*):** The large, dried, and treated leaf blades or large stems are overlapped tightly to create durable, natural thatch roofs that provide heavy insulation and protection from tropical rains.
- **Walls (*Raty*):** The flattened, woven leaves and outer layers are tied together to form flexible yet sturdy exterior and interior wall partitions.
- **Wall framework / Framing:** The robust leaf stalks (petioles) are stripped and aligned vertically or horizontally as panels to build rigid screens and wall structures.
- **Flooring and substructure (*Rapaka*):** The fibrous outer trunk and split woody stems are laid down to form elevated flooring components, commonly raised on stilts to protect against ground humidity and pests.
- **Doors and details:** Sturdy petioles and smaller sections are fashioned into basic structural doors, gables, and ventilation slats.



Mixed use of traditional and modern materials in construction of a dwelling with the design incorporating practical considerations related to the hot and humid tropical climate.



Fascinating ruins within the historic settlement Maradoka, located along the southeast coast of Nosy Be island.



Examples of traditional vernacular design and building materials used here with tourism accommodation. Note the presence of handmade timber shutters (repeated in opposite rear wall) to allow regulation of airflow. Local residents' homes and most tourism lodge do not offer modern air conditioning (too expensive and electricity supply simply not available) but rather rely on traditional methods.





Examples of traditional design and natural materials used in the construction of expat (mostly French) homes along the west coast of the island Nosy Komba (Island of Lemurs). The steeper roof angle allows quicker run-off and extends the lifespan of Falafa with its excellent insulation properties and protection during tropical downpours.

(PART 2 in the next Newsletter.)

*Compiled by Pat Kramer & edited by Antonia Malan - publications@vassa.org.za.
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