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The South African townscape : conservation & development conflicts

Abstract

This article examines some aspects of urban conservation practices in South Africa since World War Two. The conservation of individual homesteads in rural areas is being neglected in favour of the powerful inter-relationship and context implied by townscape. The continuation of this trend does not, however, mean that rural landscape conservation is unimportant, but rather indicates the primary need for sustainable townscaping.

Keywords: urban conservation, sustainable townscaping, South Africa.

DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE STADSBEELD: BEWARING EN ONTWIKKELINGSKONFLIKTE

Hierdie artikel ondersoek sekere aspekte van stedelike bewarings-praktyke in Suid-Afrika sedert die Tweede Wêreldoorlog. Suksesvolle bewaring van indivuele wonings in landelike gebiede sal oor die hoof gesien word ten gunste van die sterk samespel en konteks wat die stads-beeld impliseer. Dit beteken nie dat landskapsbewaring onbelangrik is nie, maar eerder dat die aksent op stedelike volhoubaarheid val.

Sleutelwoorde: Stedelike bewaring, stedelike volhoubaarheid, Suid-Afrika.

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Introduction

In most countries worldwide, planners question the feasibility of conserving town centres, in view of pressures such as wholesale speculative development, urban sprawl and the motor car. For South Africa, the present period of "reconstruction and redistribution" is far more complex than that of Eastern Europe or the re-unification of Germany. Here the dreaded word "poverty" must also feature in the list of challenges facing conservation. Since 80% of the South African population has such very basic needs as housing, health and education (quantity) it seems difficult to justify the allocation of scarce resources to quality.

The public sector

But before any decision can be made on this issue, the roles of the public and private sectors must be examined. The ideal role of government is threefold: to facilitate conservation by setting a good example in its public works, to provide "seed money", and to forge partnerships with the private sector. As long ago as 1980 the central government's White Paper on conservation laid down guidelines for co-ordination, increased power, education and awareness. The new South African constitution contains some promising "environmental" clauses and a National Trust is in the offing.

It is instructive to examine the National Monuments Council, which falls under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Science. The main functions of this long-established council are the research, identification and "declaration" of buildings and townscapes worthy of conservation. Such an advisory body occupies an uneasy position in a civil service hierarchy comprising powerful departments like Public Works, Transport and Community Development (now defunct).

Although the Department of Public Works owns hundreds of important buildings, from courts and housing to ministries and Parliament itself, it has no direct conservation function, nor does it take kindly to advice on re-use or adaptation. The demolition of government buildings is subject to the permission of the Monuments Council, but in practice unilateral decisions are made. The defunct Department of Community Development might have been expected to contribute to conservation and

urban renewal. However, it was responsible for the destruction of historic housing in District Six (Cape Town) or Pageview.

The old South African Transport Services (now "unbundled") owned a large part of the built heritage, including fine Victorian railway stations, harbour warehouses and strategically used land. One promising development in this context is a partnership between the private sector and the railways, aimed at re-using and conserving railway property. The Durban station, for example, was restored as a prestige office building. Workshops were refurbished as a shopping mall and exhibition centre. In Cape Town an exciting plan has converted the old Victoria & Alfred Basins into an upmarket entertainment and marina complex, the Waterfront, not unlike the Rocks, in Sydney.

One should also mention the work of parastatal corporations or large industrial and mining projects that pay little or no respect to the built fabric. The Electricity Supply Commission, for example, completely neglects the appearance of power stations and townships. Spider-webs of power lines dwarf or negate conservation while the Post Office's microwave towers deface the townscape. However, 1978 saw a watershed in South African conservation when the Post Office, for once, bowed to public pressure and saved the West façade of Church Square in Pretoria, at the heart of the gridiron plan of the country's capital.

The country comprises nine provinces, which form the second tier of government. By comparison, the provinces have less power than similar Australian states. The South African museum services in most of the provinces try to find uses for historic buildings, and in the Cape alone 100 buildings have been saved. In the city core of Durban there is an outstanding example of recycling by the province – the well-known Natal Playhouse for the Performing Arts Council. It is thus clear that maximum financial backing from sponsors and moral support from the second tier of government, the provincial level, can only be beneficial.

In theory, the third tier of government should address conser-vation at a "grassroots" level, but in practice expertise is scarce since approval or finance is required from senior governments. Some of the larger municipalities like Cape Town or Durban employ highly sensitive urban conservation units which implement policies and use persuasion to establish partnerships with the private sector. However, most municipalities suffer from

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the negative impact of large motorways, with inner city routes more often than not slicing through historic parks or housing. In Port Elizabeth, for example, a massive aerial freeway cuts off the historic core of the city from the harbour. In the case of Cape Town, public outcry halted the construction of one side of the inner loop. Pedestrian malls, too, often tend to be planned in isolation, instead of forming part of an integrated strategy for conservation and traffic management.

The private sector

It has been argued that Galbraith's ideas on "private affluence and private squalor" influence the attitude of the greater part of the private sector towards conservation, but here, too, inherent conflicts between the profit motive and public goals are played out in the built environment. Incentives for private sector participation (tax rebates or the transfer of development rights) can only be effective as part of firm civic policies and partnerships. Four bodies are involved in this process.

A pioneer in this field was Historic Hopes, founded in 1966 and based in the Cape-Dutch university town of Stellenbosch. It has saved over 100 properties, and undertaken 200 restorations, always attempting to restore interiors to their "best period". Its useful spin-offs include the creation of specialist building teams and firms of conservation architects of outstanding quality in the Western Cape.

Some forty years ago the Van der Stel Foundation was established with the aim of increasing awareness and raising funds for conservation. With branches in most provinces, this foundation is motivated by cultural idealism rather than profit, but it tends towards "elitism", which is unfortunate in the new South Africa.

Two civic trusts, in Durban and Cape Town, respectively, help to cherish the Indian and Malay cultures. In 1997 the Cape Town Heritage Trust was instrumental in saving the historic Heritage Square, the only place in the world where a unique mix of Georgian and Cape-Dutch styles, dating from 1771, is to be found. Further north, the city of Johannesburg founded on gold devours its built fabric with every generation, while some Dutch and English traces remain in Pretoria. Here we note the work of vernacular societies, as well as a healthier trend away from the

conservation of single buildings to an awareness of the townscape.

To summarise the four problems common to the public and private sectors:

1. *Codes of conduct.* One rule, whether in the form of legislation or administration, is required for both the public and the private sector. State agencies should not exempt themselves from control, and the public good must figure in profit-generating projects.
2. *Sponsorship & incentives.* In South Africa business is far more eager to support sport sponsorship than conservation. There is scope here for more financial incentives.
3. *Co-ordination & teamwork.* Adequate legislation for conservation already exists, but the given framework needs to be streamlined and enforced. Furthermore, there is a lack of middle management and expertise. Teamwork and negotiation do not suit a macho, competitive society.
4. *Attitudes.* Besides the NIMBY ("not in my back-yard") syndrome, the benefits of "privatising" public spaces such as town squares, parks and waterfronts are seldom weighed against the social costs thereof. The townscape is internalised and public participation is seen merely as a token or even as a nuisance.

Three case studies

Three case studies of medium-sized cities will now be discussed, namely Bloemfontein (1846), Kimberley (1871) and Grahamstown (1812). Bloemfontein was founded some 700 km from the coast (10 years after Adelaide in Australia) for military and communication reasons. Not surprisingly, it was laid out like a Roman gridiron with a square at the crossing of the axes. Three subsequent axes are noteworthy. Besides the main Maitland Street (east-west) and the linear water supply, the *Spruit* (east-west), a third monumental boulevard, President Brand Street, developed on the north-south axis. It presents a unified townscape and landscape around a cluster of institutions such as the Appeal Court, High Court, *Presidensie* and City Hall (*See Figure 1*).

Due to development pressures and "benign neglect", however, Bloemfontein has destroyed most links with the past. In particular, a new ice blue Civic Centre in glass and steel has been built

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alongside the warm sandstone and tile roofs of President Brand Street. The architect justified it by saying that it provided "harmony in contrast". In Hoffman Square a formal garden has been replaced by hard surfaces, and a retail chain almost persuaded the City Council to allow the rezoning of a public open space. The linear open space and drainage channel (the *Spruit*) had already suffered the intrusion of a bus station and shopping centre (built right over it).

Much like Ballarat or Kalgoorlie, arid Kimberley in the Northern Cape was a roisterous mining town most famous at the time of the diamond rush of 1871. At one stage its population even exceeded that of the colonial capital, Cape Town. Amid its spider-web of streets (wheelbarrow tracks!) and the spoil heaps of the Big Hole, a symbolic town square is left open. The town hall is part of a remarkable Victorian townscape, which had great potential for conservation and tourism, but has received mixed treatment. Further problems were caused by the demolition of the humble houses of the Malay Camp. This was considered a neat way of privatising a historic area so that large civic buildings could be inserted on the south side. On the edge of the town square to the north, the Post Office prevailed upon the Municipality to relax height and bulk regulations for the sake of a gray slab-like skyscraper.

Grahamstown, the oldest of these examples, was also founded for military reasons about the same time that Raffles founded Singapore. It was an attempt to settle the border wars in the Eastern Cape. It lies in a hollow surrounded by superb hills and has the only real High Street in South Africa. Two unique public squares have evolved, namely Church and Market. Church Square is in fact a "triangle" and has a rich townscape consisting of elements like a town hall, a cathedral and some Victorian shops (*See Figure 2*). Here massive traffic and parking intrusion are experienced that beg for pedestrianisation. A good example for conservation incentive is Fiddlers Green, a charming open space Downhill from Church Square. The Grahamstown Trust is concerned that the municipality will allow shops there. Half of the second largest square has already been allocated for a police station, while some quarter is used for a parking lot. Besides rising ethical questions, there is the dubious practice of "privatizing" land in public ownership and offering it to speculators. After all

there are values of sentiment and symbolism involved which give special meaning to non-material and shared cultures.

Conclusion

The South African society is a complex mix of people with differing priorities and at different stages of development. There is an inherent conflict between informal development and planned conservation. Besides climatic contrasts and environmental interaction, patterns of conservation reflect a complex cultural mix and a lack of shared values. Sustainability in conservation will depend on greater teamwork between public and private sectors, and much needed public participation. Permanence and change in South African townscape will only be achieved by determining needs, setting priorities, examining alternatives and acting decisively. Synergy and sensitivity are paramount in achieving balance between development and conservation in our cities.
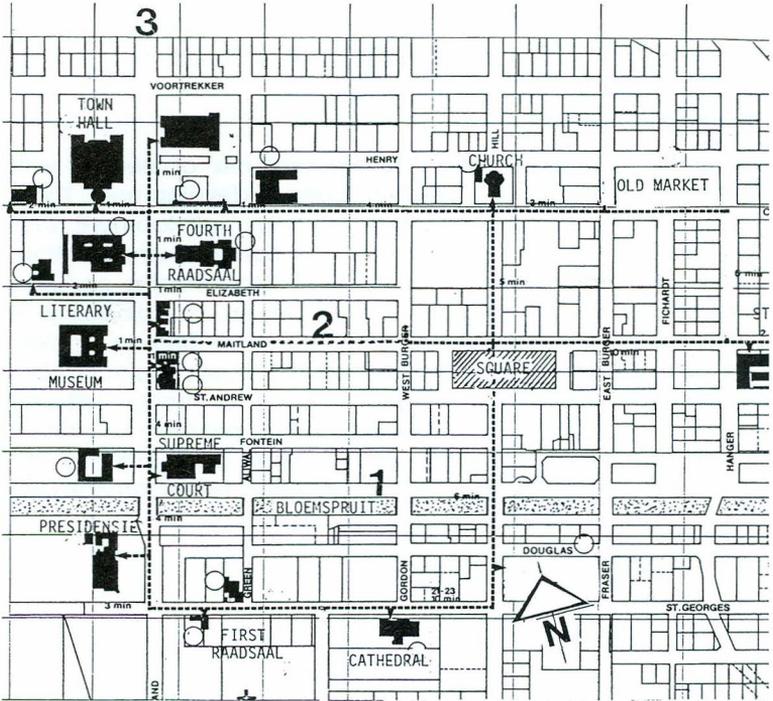
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Figure 1: Bloemfontein's core with its three axes: (1) Bloemspruit, (2) Maitland Street and (3) President Brand Street with historic buildings
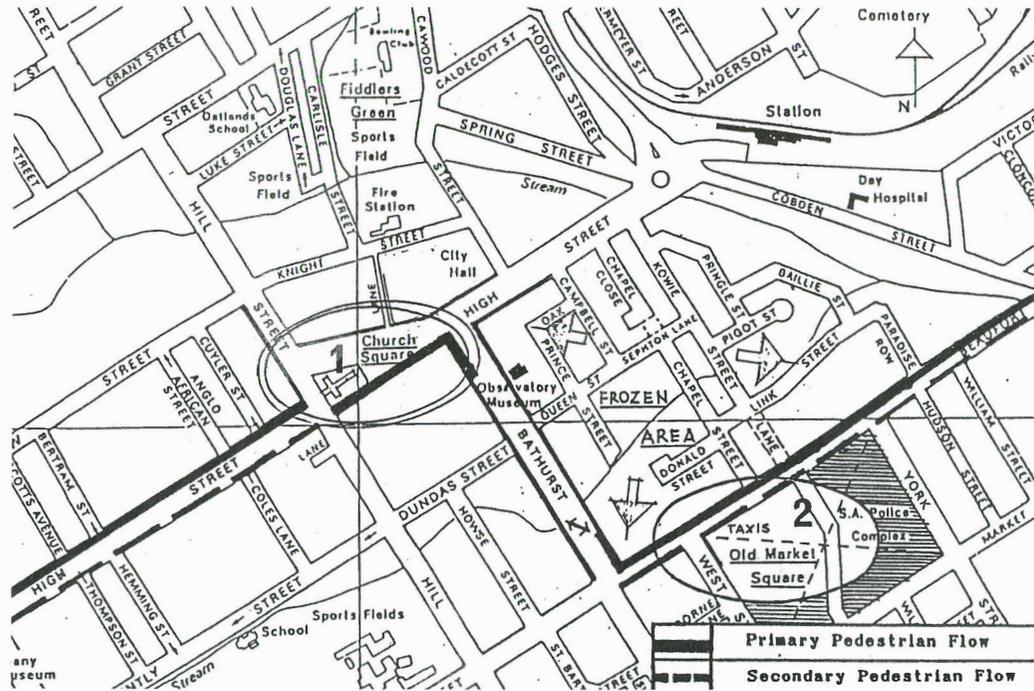
Figure 2: Grahanstown's core area showing (1) Church Square and
(2) the old Market Square. Note the main pedestrian flow