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Workshop 12 The Changing Visions of Living

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**H O L I S M A N D T H E S A C R E D N E S S O F S H E L T E R – A S O U T H E R N A F R I C A N  
E X P E R I E N C E**

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If ever there was any doubt, the events of the past 11 months have confirmed that the defining issue of this century is going to be social sustainability. However, of the triple bottom-line accounting approach to sustainability, this is the one aspect that is the most difficult to define. It is also the one aspect that rests most properly with the architectural profession with regard to the built environment. In line with the UIA Accord, it is architects alone among the built environment professions who have to satisfy the cultural aspirations of communities in human settlements.

Architecture has historically been a fundamental component of the human need to find meaning to existence: it follows therefore, that a socially responsible architecture will be able to assist its users to find and add meaning to their lives. There rests therefore a very real obligation and duty on contemporary architects to review their design methodologies against the need for social relevance. In my view, parachuting – where the architect drops a predetermined form onto a site – cannot satisfy the requirement for social justice.

The urge to find meaning for one's existence goes back to the first peoples as is evidenced in all the wall paintings of early man. Their paintings transformed the caves from natural 'spaces' to cultural 'places'<sup>1</sup>. Contemporary Man is living in an era in which more than ever people are asking philosophical questions about identity and reality. How do I experience it? As Slavoj Žižek<sup>2</sup> puts it "Today everyone can imagine the end of the world, but nobody can imagine a different social order. Although we live in an era of allegedly free choices, they are often vain ones – like the choice between Pepsi or Coke."

One of the most obvious consequences of Globalisation has been its impact on local building traditions. Joe Aranha<sup>3</sup>, a Fulbright Professor from Texas Tech University, has noted that the major forces of change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the universal spread of the modern movement together with the more recent phenomenon of globalisation, have affected traditional built environments and have tended to crush regional identity throughout the world.

Our own experience in southern Africa has confirmed this. More recently, these losses of traditional building culture and environment together with the placeless character of contemporary "global" architecture have initiated local and foreign architects working in southern Africa to search for ways to re-establish regional and local architectural identity. As Laurens van der Post has put it "without history we have no meaning."<sup>4</sup>

For most societies the notion of heritage and the continuity of tradition in architecture is a complex one that requires careful consideration when viewed in terms of the forces of modernization, globalisation and urbanisation. The argument focuses on regional identity and architectural authenticity in the context of imitative versus derivative approaches to the carrying forward of tradition in the built environment. This approach measures an architect by his ability to translate the social values of the community into the building fabric. As Nor Prinsloo<sup>5</sup> puts it "In the southern African context, an architecture of experience would make reference to the ultimate users themselves and focus on their emerging experience as a totality."

In our contemporary world, and given the population numbers of our cities, it is not possible for each person to undertake the construction of his shelters. So it is no wonder that the rapid expansion of cities and villages has led to a breakdown of social structure and health standards. The current forces of globalisation has the power to further aggravate the separation of the individual from an 'architecture of experience'.

The South African Institute of Architects has just completed the review of submissions for their Award of Merit and Award of Excellence Programmes and it has been both rewarding and refreshing to note that, unlike many of our contemporaries overseas, our meritorious work is not reflective of the new Internationalism, or what Hans Ibelings<sup>7</sup> has labelled 'supermodernism'. The key notion of that philosophy is to deliberately disconnect architecture from the cultural and physical landscape: in this way, it becomes global and a-contextual.

Professor Errol Harloff<sup>8</sup> has noted that one of the characteristics of the architecture of the southern hemisphere is its continuing validation of the significance of cultural and physical landscapes in defining architecture, irrespective of any other design agendas. The physical qualities of Africa have much to do with this ability: no one in this country can be untouched by the vast spaces, the quality of the landscape, or the brilliance of the light. 'Students of human psycho-dynamics demonstrate that all of humankind's actions and interactions, both conscious and habitual, are based on the way in which information is processed from the environment. They acknowledge that whilst the foundation of this processing is intrinsic to human nature, it is substantially subject to conditioning. It follows that our information processing is learned'.<sup>9</sup>

One of the negative impacts of Globalisation and Colonialism – the forerunner to Globalisation – is that the indigenous pattern of information processing learned from one's predecessors over generations, is sublimated to a new processing order that is hardly understood and a-contextual. Many of the indigenous people of Southern Africa have

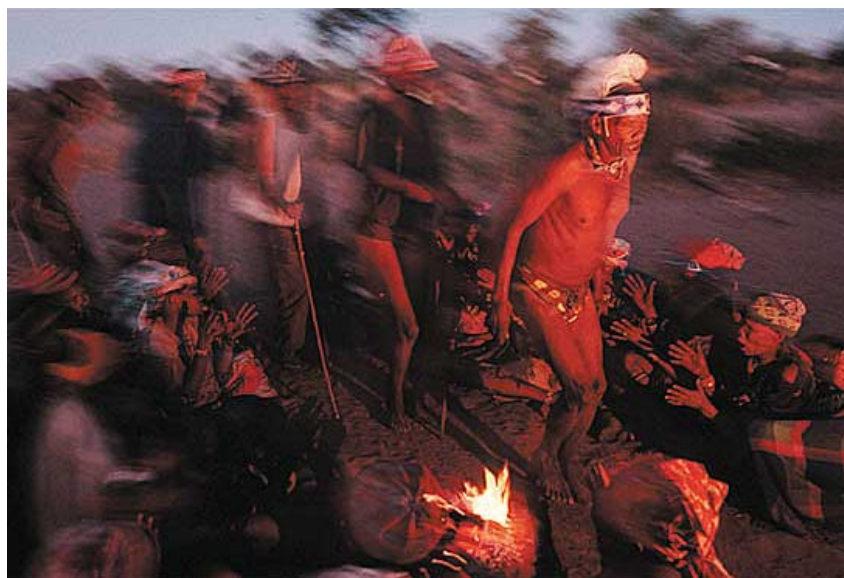
consequently forgotten key components of their cultural traditions and are having to relearn those concepts from the few Elders who remember them. However – and here is the good news – the process of re-learning has begun.

### **H o l i s m**

It is important that this re-learning extend beyond the borders of our regional experience. According to Laurens van der Post<sup>10</sup>, “the Bushmen was a walking pilot scheme of how the European man could find his way back to values he had lost and he needed for his own renewal”. This renewal is dependent upon us recovering reverence for all forms of created life.

General Jan Smuts, one of South Africa’s great sons, described his philosophy of Holism as the tendency in nature for disparate elements to coalesce in greater wholes – the result of which is more than the sum of the parts. This functions at the basis of chemistry, biology, all living organisms including the individual being and his relationship to society, the elements of his character and social character, nations, the planetary system and culminating in supra-undane reality – the essence of which underpins the divine character of man. Holism is a function of the viability of relationship (in itself requiring the capacity to hold the greatest picture view) as an evolutionary potential and is an ever-growing progression of creativity into more sustainable wholes. It is process orientated rather than systemic.

Many other contemporary thinkers shared this notion of interdependency and integration. According to van der Post<sup>11</sup>, “...to me, every insect and animal somehow is part of the Word made life, made flesh, made real. It is the word in action. Everyone and everything carries this charge. It carries, as it were, a signature of creation. Nothing is unsigned in life: a great seal is stamped on great and small. The Bushmen feel known wherever he went. The stars knew him. He felt known. Wherever he went he felt he belonged. But modern man has lost this feeling of being known”. Their experience is also a warning to us. “If we do not recover this sense nature will turn on us one day, and we will be eliminated as the Bushmen were eliminated<sup>12</sup>.”



You cannot but be aware that in Africa it is not Man that is in charge, but Nature. If you come to a river in flood, you have to just wait for the water to subside before you can

cross. Out of his experiences in Africa, Jung – a close personal friend of van der Post – developed his theory of ‘collective unconscious’ in man. In all human beings, he argued, there is such an area in which the whole life participates mystically. People in Africa he felt were in touch with it and realized that the meaning of their lives depended on their not losing touch with the collective unconscious. It is from this collective unconscious that all our greatest energies come, all the patterns that give meaning. The Africans had ceremonies and dances, music and stories to express this, and ritual to contain it.

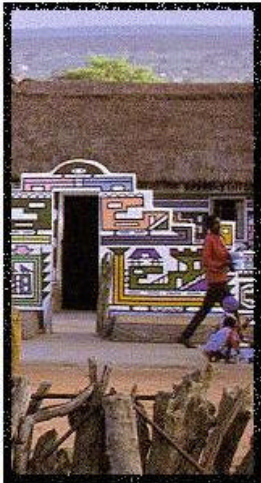
The impact of Colonialism on this ‘collective unconscious’ can be measured in the response Jung received from an Elgonyi man when he asked him what great dream he had, to which the man replied; “I’m afraid we don’t have great dreams anymore now – the District Commissioner has them for us instead.<sup>13</sup>” That is the curse of modern life – it is so easy to let others dream for you. And how easy it is for architects to dream for others.

### **The Lessons Learnt**

Applying the philosophy of Holism to the act of building would imply that structures that are holistic would include respect, even reverence, for the multi-dimensional evolving potential of the human experience way beyond the mere material and poetic experience. It responds to all the physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs of the inhabitant. In giving consideration to implementing the principles of Holism into shelter, the following design principles emerge as worthy of consideration:

- Ergonomics of the shelter including respect for privacy of individuals and facilitation of gathering.
- Ergonomics of social interaction within the community facilitating multi-cultural meeting and expression and social enrichment.
- Expression of own culture in art and all forms of creativity and openness to enrichment.
- Expression of own culture in worship taking note of symbolic aspirations and having regard to the encouragement of openness to novelty.
- Participation in construction, even though this may not be in the physical act itself but through consultation during the design process.
- Opportunities to exercise human interaction with the natural environment, through, for example, gardening, so that one may be constantly recreating and developing one’s environment.
- Economic considerations, viabilities and the capacity for growth and innovative development.
- Ecological considerations with inherent flexibility and offering a natural synthesis with the environment.

### **The Lessons Applied**



Viewed from this perspective, the architect has an awesome role in facilitating this thrust towards wholeness. It begins by an understanding that the structure is more than just a defence mechanism from the elements. The notion of building has a deeper significance than the mere creation of use: the 'act' of building together with the 'meaning' of shelter has a spiritual value that is embedded in both the structure and the environment. In African philosophy, any act that sustains life is part of the divine: hence the mother's breast is considered the first god that a newborn experiences. A building as shelter forms an essential part of sustaining the life of the individual, the family and the community. As such, it is recognised as an integral part of the sacred whole. In essence, the structure creates divine imminence.

Peter Rich, recipient of numerous architectural awards in South Africa, has done much research over many years into the rural dwellings of the Southern Ndebele ('mapogga') and the Bantwane. His work embodies the following design notions learned through his reinterpretation of the architecture of the Mapogga.

- Formality and Open-ended-ness. The formal layout has an open-ended-ness, which deals with asymmetry where the need arises.
- Social organisation. The planning of the structure is expressive of the social order. It takes cognisance of the needs and demands of the occupants, recognising that this will change over time.
- The Village concept. Ndebele homesteads are at once both house and village. The grouping of the huts is the result of incremental growth, but each addition makes the most of creating new spaces of equal quality. Rich puts it thus: "A house is not a home unless it is a village."
- The Outdoor Room. The buildings are placed to form enclosing loose fitting outdoor rooms and courtyards. The internal and external spaces act as one. The outdoor spaces also attenuate climatic conditions either trapping heat in winter or cooling breezes in summer.
- The Entrance Threshold. The transition from public to private space is clearly defined wherever it occurs. Entrance thresholds are extended in many ways. This includes designing the formal entrance route – the garden, the entrance court, and the front door – differently from the daily routes. The Molatedi Community, for example, has 39 different words to describe a threshold.
- The Implied Diagonal. In Mapogga Homesteads the unit grows to the back or on an implied diagonal and therefore forward. The sculptured embellishments to the courtyard's corners serves to enhance this visual diagonal. The Mapogga are able to

achieve an implied diagonal within an orthogonal grid without the awkwardness of the rigid 45 geometry of much contemporary architecture.

- Form. In Mapogga architecture the house form is kept simple: any adornment is restricted to the walls and the garden.
- Landscaping. The dwelling becomes a stage set to be viewed from outside. Similarly, an awareness of the outside is created from inside by framed views.
- Raw Architecture. The structure of the dwelling reveals how it was made and of what it was made.

Sustainability ultimately must imply more than the judicious use of resources: for our world to survive its component parts need to be re-united into a cohesive and interdependent whole. Social sustainability has to do with developing those components that sustain life and provide meaning. We will achieve social relevance when we create architecture of experience that goes beyond our experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid