Apartheid Politics and Architecture in South Africa

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ABSTRACT: With the institutionalization of Apartheid in 1948, and the enactment of laws thereafter, South African architects were required to give substance to this ideology in their designs. This article covers early examples of public architecture which were not located in the townships, but in the established urban areas, where the segregation of facilities by race was taken up by architects as a functional planning challenge. These works have no iconographic base, but the paths of movement through the buildings imbed Apartheid perniciousness in their plans. Like other sections of white South African society, to many architects operating in such racially structured context, discrimination became an insouciant practice.

The Racially Structured Context

The term apartheid is Afrikaans, the language of the Afrikaners, and means ‘separateness’. It applies particularly to the policy of racial separation in force in South Africa during the latter half of the twentieth century. But the groundwork had been laid at the beginning of that century, in 1910, when the British colonies of Cape and Natal were united with the Afrikaner republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State, to form the Union of South Africa. This Union resulted in a virtual monopoly of political power by English and Afrikaans-speaking whites, thereby disenfranchising the majority population of black South Africans including Indians and ‘coloureds’ (of mixed racial ancestry). In addition, the Land Act (1913), key legislative prop of segregation, restricted black land ownership to reserves (which later became the basis of the homelands), and the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923) enforced residential segregation, with the Native Laws Amendment Act (1937) requiring towns to enforce that segregation.

In the 1948 election campaign the political party representing Afrikaner nationalist interests, the National Party, won a narrow victory under the slogan apartheid. Segregation then became implemented in several distinct phases. The first decade, which Omer-Cooper (1989) calls baasskap (white supremacy), lasted from 1948 to the end of the 1950s, and saw the transformation of ideas into legislative form. The decade ended in 1961 with the achievement of the Afrikaner nationalists’ ‘most cherished dream’, the transformation of South Africa into an Afrikaner-ruled republic (Omer-Cooper, 1989, p. 193). ‘Separate Development’ with nominally independent homelands for each ethnic group and forced removals or relocations to implement the policy and deny black
compatriots South African citizenship, followed until the mid-1970s. Then international condemnation prompted the ‘total strategy’ of the National Party. It instigated reforms including the removal of segregation of some public facilities, which was then deemed ‘petty apartheid’. But the fundamental aspects of apartheid, e.g. racial classification, the homelands policy and black exclusion from the franchise remained. The National Party clung to power until 1994, dominated by ‘separateness’.

Townships, homeland parliaments and other ‘apartheid-supportive’ projects (Schirmacher, 1986, pp. 14–15) have received wide publicity (Owen, 1989; Judin, 1998) but these have a genealogy which has been overlooked. And easily so, for the founding works which had to promote the ideology of apartheid were not built in verdant homelands, nor do they have an iconographic base. These were public buildings and the implementation of ‘separateness’ is encoded on plans. This article will focus on the link between apartheid politics and architecture in the first phase, a phase in which whites were officially classified as ‘European’ and blacks, as ‘non-European’ or later ‘non-white’, terms which the architect’s plans contain, and for consistency are here used. The examples are demonstrative rather than comprehensive and were designed by leading architects and practices of the time.

Race as the Organising Principle

In the wake of the 1948 election victory, segregation became systematised, being applied rigidly and dogmatically in accordance with the theories of apartheid. But, to support ‘separateness’, a set of legislation had to be enacted. Those which affect architecture include the Population Registration Act (1950) which classified all South Africans by race; the Group Areas Act (1953), often cited as cornerstone of apartheid, created to maintain separate living areas for all population groups; and the supporting Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) which extended segregation to any premises, transport, ‘benches, counters, or other amenity or contrivance’ to be announced by notices. Administrative action ensured social and cultural segregation in public buildings with, e.g., railway stations with separate concourses and carriages for whites and blacks; a directive which architects generally accepted as a functional challenge their designs simply had to accommodate.

Architectural Examples

During the 1950s South African architecture drew inspiration from Brazilian modernism. Some architects travelled to Brazil to inspect the achievements at first hand, others were fascinated by the publications. The examples chosen here are public buildings commissioned by the Public Works Department. They were designed in the Brazilian mode with brises soleil as sun-control measures, and the segregation of races was an overt requirement of the brief. It must also be mentioned that two buildings are in Namibia, a territory at the time mandated to South Africa. And, interestingly all face direct east or west sun, a predicament resolved.
The first example is the Windhoek Airport (1957), now known as Eros. The accomplishment of the segregational requirement is best summarised by quoting the architects:

The whole of the provision made for European Passengers has been duplicated for the non-European, including their own restaurant. In each case there is a Promenade Deck overlooking the airfield. (*Windhoek Airport*, 1959, p. 35)

Despite that explanation, the circulation path for each race is not quite clear. The ground floor plan (Fig. 1) shows the 'main entrance' projecting from the building mass and a parallel yet unlabelled minor entrance alongside. Assuming the latter to be the 'non-European' entrance, the check-in counter ('baggage') appears to have been common, but the Concourse was surely duplicated in the building tagged behind in the space labelled 'NE Passengers'. Across the yard, these passengers could then ascend a flight of steps to reach the 'NE Restaurant' (serviced from a common kitchen) and overlook a promenade deck, which appears to have been inaccessible (Fig. 2). To talk of a view to the airfield is overstretching the definition of airfield. A similar segregated circulation applies to disembarking passengers who then pass common immigration, customs and baggage areas.

The concept replicates the domestic typology whereby quarters for servants (always 'non-European'), provided with minimal amenities, were generally separated from the main house by a service yard outside the kitchen, and often attached to the garage.

The second example is the international airport, some 40kms east of Windhoek, built a decade later (1965/66) (Fig. 3). It was the architects' responsibility to establish the accommodation schedule but the authorities cautioned:

that this was a mandatory territory over which they (South Africa) were governing and facilities for non-whites were to be equal in all respects to that provided for whites. (J.G. Strijdom Airport, 1967, p16)

While the architects noted that 'the non-white passenger traffic ... was almost nil ...', they nevertheless designed a parallel concourse for blacks together with a dedicated cafeteria and promenade deck, all admittedly smaller in scale but with equal aspect, and proudly concluded that they had met with the caution by the authorities because '... finishes throughout the non-white areas are equal in all respects to that provided for the whites'. What is more, as the airport is designed in the vein of Saarinen’s TWA Terminal, such building designs are difficult to extend, yet the architects considered that possibility. For this a subway was proposed which

...when the necessary traffic of non-whites increased, would allow the non-white passengers to pass under the communication lines of the white passengers ... (J.G. Strijdom Airport, 1967, p17)

Considering the statistics of ‘non-white’ passengers and the fact that they would board a non-segregated aircraft, the insistence on duplication and the
Fig. 1. Ground Floor Plan, Terminal building, Windhoek Eros Airport, 1957/8. Architects: WW Wood & Partners. SA Architectural Record, February 1959. Note the Main Entrance (left) with the non-European section lagged behind. On embarkation, passengers would enter through separate reception areas (right).
Fig. 2. Upper Floor Plan, Terminal building, Windhoek Eros Airport. A common kitchen serves the Restaurant, which opens to the Promenade Deck, as well as the non-European Restaurant overlooking the rear, ‘non-European’ Promenade Deck — and which could hardly have provided a view to the airfield.
resultant expenditure were fully unnecessary. Appropriately the airport was named ‘J.G. Strijdom’ after the South African prime minister well known for his extreme views.

But, happily, no one seems to remember the parallel circulation route, and one can assume that it must have been short-lived.

The third example is the Post Office in Pietersburg (1959) now Polokwane, capital of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The brief prescribed that: ‘Special note had to be made of segregation of races, where it was at all possible’. The Post Office called for a large public hall with counters for cashiers and writing ledges for the European public as well as a ‘public hall’ with the same facilities for the non-European public. It was a requirement that both European and non-European counters and cashiers be accessible and easily supervised by the head cashier. The Registered Post section for Europeans and non-Europeans was to be linked with the Sorting section; Parcels areas and Private Bag sections were required each for European and non-European public; but the Private Box section which was to be linked with a large sorting hall, was to be available to both Europeans and non-Europeans at all times.

The architect, German immigrant Hellmut Stauch (1910–70), a product of the Itten-Schule in Berlin, had visited Brazil, and the commission for this building followed from a friendship the gregarious architect struck on board with the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs in whose constituency the town lay.
To Stauch the planning problems presented a functional challenge and he appears to have been more concerned with the impact of the west-orientated front on the main street, and opposite the civic centre. Here Stauch provided a wide, main entrance off the street for Europeans, and two surreptitious entrances, that for blacks at one extreme side of the building, that for private boxes at the other (Fig. 4). In the case of the former, the resultant L-arrangement of the counters made for easy supervision by the head cashier; in the case of the latter Stauch used the common space to give access to the separate sections listed. As a result of such a simple planning solution, the obligatory signage to designate-use by race was obviously necessary!

The design challenges for segregation in bank design, how whites and non-whites entered through separate doors, but were served by the same clerks behind a wrap-around counter has been eloquently documented by Silverman (1998). But not all design problems were restricted to a separation of two races. In Durban, where four race groups co-exist and facilities needed to be segregated, the resolution of the circulation problem could become very difficult. Hence one can understand a sense of achievement by the architects who successfully resolved the circulation of the Durban Law Courts (1972/73), in any event a complex building to design, here compounded by quadruple racial segregation and its high-rise massing.

In the second phase of apartheid, homelands were created, eight in all. Their aim was to deny black South Africans citizenship and rights of residence in South Africa and to entrench separate black tribal ethnicities. For these homelands, parliamentary buildings had to be built and in great haste, e.g. for the provisional capital building of the homeland of Bophuthatswana, the architects were given eight months in 1977, from design to hand over, a feat the architects even compared with Paxton’s Crystal Palace (Bophuthatswana, 1978, p. 18). The final building by other architects was built in 1978–83, in hot pursuit indeed.

Architects and the Profession

Should the architects have refused their commissions? In retrospect it may be easy to say so but, to quote Bloch and Silverman (1989, p. 24), ‘their work was stimulated as much by desire to turn a profit as to create architecture’. Yet, the architects were consciously designing for segregation, and must have been aware that their buildings would promote the goals of apartheid.

The primary role of architects is to design buildings. When fulfilling this role, it is not possible to investigate and then determine all the socio-political consequences of commissions offered them. The problem sources were based within white society, not the buildings, and it would be foolish to assume that the racism that pervaded most of white society might not permeate the architectural profession, all of whom were at that stage white. Although it may be only a modestly political act, an architect who accepts the commission to design a segregated building demonstrates a willingness to implement the segregation process. But some were politically active in opposition and faced the consequences, including incarceration and immigration.
Fig. 4. Ground Floor Plan, Pietersburg (now Polokwane) Post Office, 1959. Architects: HWE Stauch & Partners. *Public Works of South Africa*. The wide entrance off the street (left) was for ‘Europeans’; ‘Non-Europeans’ entered top left. The U-shaped formation of the counters allows for control by the centrally located Head Cashier. The Private Box Section (bottom left) was available to the total population and, off this, access was given to separate counters for parcels.
How did the architectural profession react? During the repressive years of the 1950s some affected members opted for exile; following the Sharpeville massacre (1960), some opted for more stable pastures, from which many later returned. But as an Institute, the architects remained ‘as quiet as mice’ (Schlapobersky, 1994, p. 17). The first time the profession was stirred was in 1986 when a group of concerned members called for a Special General Meeting to discuss a resolution to make it unethical for architects to design buildings the use of which was restricted on the grounds of race; designing homelands buildings which promoted the policy of Separate Development; and designing any building which would assist in enforcing apartheid. Despite the unprecedented attendance by some 600–700 members; a majority supported the counter proposal that the resolution ‘be not put’! By this time, designing for segregation had become institutionalised; in fact apartheid had reached its final stage with most of the homelands with nominal independence, with their own parliamentary structures, presidencies, armies, diplomatic corps, for example. One can only acquiesce with the summary:

Many (architects) were too busy nibbling away at the great Apartheid cheese, pre-occupied with … structures of separate development …, learning institutions, vast complexes for proliferating bureaucracies, police headquarters … (Schlapobersky, 1994, p. 17)

And, ironically, the best of such work garnered professional respect in South Africa and abroad.

Legislation affected architecture in a few other ways. The blatantly discriminatory Native Builders Amendment Act (1955) made it illegal for any person to employ a ‘native’ on skilled building work in any urban area unless exemption was obtained and this was possible only where it could be shown that European labour was not available. For the studying of architecture, the Bantu Education Act (1953) limited blacks from studying for job opportunities reserved for whites; while the ‘Extension of University Education Act’ (1959) prescribed the ‘whites only’ admissions policy to the universities and consequently to the schools of architecture. Special ministerial consent was required for ‘permit’ students, as there were no alternative schools.

Confronting the Past

In the late 1980s mounting internal and external pressures brought about the collapse of apartheid. Following the dramatic political turn by the National Party in 1990, apartheid was ended by constitutional means and the new South Africa brought about. The Separate Amenities Act, one cornerstone of racial segregation for 37 years, was repealed by an overwhelming majority.

Following the first democratic elections (1994) a constitutional provision was passed which compelled the country to confront its past. The Promotion of National Unity and National Reconciliation Bill (1995) was signed into law to establish the truth and lay the basis for genuine reconciliation by granting amnesty to those who make full disclosure of gross human rights abuses committed between 1 March 1960 and 20 May 1994. After almost three years
of hearings the report was released in 1998 in which virtually all the elements of society such as the church, business and the media felt the lash of the commission’s displeasure. Interestingly, the architectural profession did not come forward. Certainly it was no perpetrator of ‘gross human rights violations’ but it had colluded with the system which used buildings as key instruments for its repressive measures. Despite the gross application of apartheid ideology to architecture, the profession has obviously not understood its role in the ignoble past, let alone that collusion may have distorted its moral and ethical basis.

South Africa’s transition enthralled the world because it proved that seemingly intractable enemies could work out their differences and co-exist in peace. Discrimination and segregation are part of the past. However, having sustained the apartheid state, whether by act of omission or commission, architects should no longer point to others as the cause of the problem. The obligations by the profession to reconstruction should be derived from a moral basis for promoting universal design that is non-discriminatory, regardless of age, ability, economic status, race, religion, and gender. Besides, to undo the past, empowerment charters are necessary. At most schools of architecture the majority student population is black, a number of staff are too, and while mentorship in practice may not be working best, a fair number of leaders in the profession too are black. After all, South Africa is a black majority nation.

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References


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