

# L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CITTÀ UNESCO-Chair SERIES



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



SAPIENZA  
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

UNESCO Chair in Sustainable Urban Quality  
and Urban Culture, notably in Africa  
Italy



Società Scientifica Ludovico Quaroni

# L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CITTÀ



Società Scientifica Ludovico Quaroni

L'ADC L'architettura delle città. The Journal of the Scientific Society Ludovico Quaroni  
L'ADC UNESCO Series #4: *Durban A Cogent African City*  
edited by: Anna Irene Del Monaco, Liu Jian, Yashaen Luckan, Belula Tecle Misghina  
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ISSN: 2281-8731 | ISBN: 9788868128739

Cover: Durban Urban Growth by Giovanni B. Croce.

A special acknowledgment goes to Attilia De Rose (Department of Architecture and Design Administrative office of Sapienza) for the organizing and survey support to the joint Workshop of 2014.

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The railway

The Point



# Durban, as a rich, splendid, complex Botanic Gardens

## Foreword

by

LUCIO VALERIO BARBERA, ZHU WENYI

This book collects the first results of an academic joint international experience, organized as an Architectural and urban Design Workshop, shared among five academic partners of the UNESCO Chair in “Sustainable Urban Quality” (Sapienza University of Rome, Tsinghua University, Durban University of Technology, Hosei University, University of Florida, Manipal University).

The partners considered a precious opportunity to work in parallel with the UIA 2014 Conference to be held in Durban in July 2015, promoting their design workshop at the Durban University of Technology and starting their design charrette one week before the beginning of the UIA Conference for presenting the results during the UIA Program.

Our program was made possible by the flawless academic hosting of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment and, specifically, by the generous participation of professor Teo Andrew (executive Dean), Deborah Whelan (Director of Department of Architecture, DUT), Monique Marks (Head, Urban Futures Centre, DUT), and by Yashaen Luckan (former director of Department at DUT, professor, and President of the South African Council for the Architectural Profession – SACAP).

The design topic of the workshop we were asked to propose solutions for, were all timely and challenging, including urban issues of international relevance such as: townships-migrations; infrastructures development; urban quality-social facilities; relation center-periphery; informal-illegal settlements; multiple urban identities in an urban area where the balance between man and nature is maybe the most relevant issue to be considered.

Durban is the South-african most “vibrant” city, as the Durban citizens are proud to affirm. It is a complex metropolitan area where you can still easily distinguish, in the physical pattern and in the urban fabrics, the presence of different, strong cultures which contributed – in more than two hundred years – to the building of a new, complex, vital, multicultural urban identity.

However, such a complex city presents itself to the visitor with his own special poetry. It is the breath of nature that enfolds the town with its different idioms – the Ocean shores; the Bay where the harbour and the city are reflected; the flowery hills of bright trees and elegant residences; the distant profiles of the mountains. And it is the breath of its iridescent humanity that sings the unifying identity of this special town in the talks of the diverse ancestries that animate it. So that to anyone who wants to approach the city and its problems for understanding and redesigning its spaces, we recommend to visit – before starting – a place that metaphorically, poetically, biologically seems to represent the most perfect metaphor of the town: the Durban Botanic Garden. Not far from the Durban University of Technology, it is easy to reach from everywhere in the town as it is a sort of city-avel. In a small, precious book sold at the Info-point of the Garden, issued by the Parks Department City of Durban,

you can read some insights related to the time of its establishment, written by a local historian. It is the easiest way to learn how much history and how profound spirits of Durban – unity of natural environment and human settlements – live in the sweet slopes of the Garden, thick of the most vivid hues of green. Let's read together:

The Gardens was established by the "Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society" as early as 1849 when the settlement of D'Urban was little more than a village with three or four sandy tracks, an assortment of thatched cottages and huts and one-double storey house on the corner of Anton Lembede and Dorothy Nyenbe Streets (Smoth and Gardiner).

Founding a botanic gardens had been a copycat move to match Cape Town, which after decades of neglect had, that year, revived the old Dutch East India Botanic Gardens in the center of the Mother City. At first, the Durban Botanic Gardens was situated on the south bank of the Umgeni River but it had to be shifted from this hippo and croc-infested site to the lower slopes of the Berea forest in 1851. There it languished in splendid isolation, still visited by roaming lion, though somewhat cut-of from the growing town by the famous Eastern Vlei, an extensive wetland which ran from the Umgeni right up to near the present-day Warwick Avenue."

(Prof. Donal McCracken, Senior Professor at University of KwaZulu-Natal, A new history of the Durban Botanic Gardens, Group Editors)

Professor McCracken continues explaining that the "first British colonial botanic gardens was established on the West Indian island of St. Vincent in 1765. By the time the Victorian era dawned in 1837, eight working botanic gardens were busy, mostly introducing propagating and distributing fruits, timber, trees and crops of possible economic value to the forester, the colonial planter and, occasionally, the indigenous farmer." Anyway today the Durban's is the Africa's Oldest Surviving Botanic Garden, a significant witness of the convergence of the spirit of scientific observation with the need to organize a vital relationship between the resources of nature and the needs of a city in its making. To the point that the Durban Botanic Garden can be considered the oldest and most representative historical monument of the urban foundation.

From another point of view, the fruitful cohabitation of so many extraordinary and different beings of diverse natural origins that – notwithstanding the natural competition between them – together form a unique, rich, resilient and splendid environment, it seems to represent a living image of the model to which the city, in its continuous growth and transformation, can ideally adhere.

Finally, we like to point out that the synthetic and learned description of the Durban Botanic Garden by professor Donal McCracken, refers to all the main places that we met in our studies about Durban (Umgeni River, Berea, Warwick) and you will meet in the following pages. Almost mysteriously, therefore, our visit to that unforgettable Garden seemed to trace the widest, geographical and ideal townscape of our work. May be also because of this we consider the 2014 work-shop only as a kick-off, enthusiastic opportunity for a research path to be enhanced in the future.