The Indian Market. (Photo: Anna Irene Del Monaco)

Heritage and money
Contested space in a changing city

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Abstract: In the last years, South Africa urban landscape is open territory for development, specially so given the dramatically changed demographics and uses of the inner city. Particularly, in Durban the evolution of the city has been determinate by the social context which creates an indistinct agglomeration. So, fundamentally, the appreciation of the core concern of social cohesion is paramount in establishing what the heritage consists of and being able to define it in multiple ways, rather than in an architectural term which has immediate resonance with an unattainable nostalgia, an unrecognised and irrelevant history, and a perhaps misunderstood historical context.

Key words: Durban, Heritage, money, city plan, development.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the urban landscape is open territory for development, particularly so given the dramatically changed demographics and uses of the inner city. Whilst the impact on the central business districts may be palpable, the new cultural complexity of the inner suburbs has also changed, resulting in necessary densification, but also bringing with it an inarticulate building language which sits uncomfortably alongside the historic built landscape in drastically diversionary approach with respect to scale, proportion, texture and material. The protagonists of this clashing aesthetic support new types of residential and office structures, aimed at particular market sectors with specific needs which are contrary to the established built fabric, largely suburban and apartment structures built to late 19th and early 20th century standards. A compromised Provincial Heritage Authority, *Amafa aKwaZulu Natali*, is positioned at the mercy of developers, who may nod to the law and pay lip service where necessary, but are not wont to embrace any creative forms of design in retaining streetscape, scale and proportion, and provision of space for an inclusive city. Whilst the Berea, one of the oldest suburbs in the city has areas deemed wealthy and exclusive, it is these fiduciary qualities which drive the need to demolish and redevelop in these areas, rather than the commonly understood character of the physical space, texture of the urban fabric and established garden space with old trees and verdant planting. Unlike most European cities, Durban, South Africa, counts its age relatively easily. Not long ago its elevated Berea consisted of dense vegetation struck through with occasional elephant paths. The early settlers chose to live in the sandy lands closer to the natural bay and a number of homesteads of the aboriginal southern Nguni people were scattered here and there.[1] Even by the mid-1850s the

1. Kearney 2013, p. 727.

Berea which separated the sea from the lands inland was relatively uninhabited: Eliza Fielden related in 1855 that on the way to their new home, "My husband cut a road through the bush, which formed a continuous triumphal arch for at least a mile, the richest flowering shrubs and perfumes on each side meeting overhead, and lovely creepers, intertwined with flowers and wild fruits, hanging down".[2] By this time, Durban had become a relatively busy port, with secure occupation by the British after 1843, and the arrival of a number of largely western European settlers during the various immigration schemes around the early 1850s. Driven by carts and transport riders in wagons, these people would set off inland, crossing over the Berea at its lowest point, in 1855 the Toll Bar later the Tollgate.[3] For the next decades, the focus on the port and the fledgling town of Durban was to occupy the minds of the settlers, rather than the outward expansion up and over the Berea which was partly settled on the Bay side. However, particularly after World War II this was to change, with the key areas around the main arterials in and out of the city over the Berea and south and north, being developed. The buildings were symptomatic of an English-derived architecture as practiced in the homeland, of masonry construction and occasionally wood and iron but in a Victorian aesthetic, with vernacular components made real by climate and material. Importantly, the scale of the buildings and the proportions of their openings were determined by material and its structural abilities and less by prevailing trends. Floor to ceiling ratios were also determined by class and by purpose, meaning that the general scale of the cityscape had predictable components and a more or less homogenous aesthetic reinforced by British settler culture and more latterly, a vernacular layer introduced onto buildings by settlers from the Asian sub-continent from the 1860s onwards. Today, from an aesthetic perspective, the skyline of Durban's Berea, once a relatively uniform mix of staid late 19th century and early to mid-20th century conventional housing in an Edwardian and Union Period style with later modernist high rise apartment blocks, is rapidly changing to reflect new aspects of society with new norms and values which introduce an incoherent gaucheness to a reasonably homogenous environment. This is a symptom, it is suggested, by a misunderstood common space of three different entities: the heritage sector which controls, regulates and designs within historic environments and are sometimes even the culprits of clumsy design resolutions, a much-changed development sector with different norms, standards and economic models, and a socially progressive clientele, with focus on the situation, rather than the amenity of the neighborhood and environment.

The position of the heritage sector

Heritage legislation in the country is over a century old, with the first *Bushman Relics Act* of 1911 being one of the first Acts passed by the Union Government after 1910. Whilst this legislation changed over the decades of the 20th century the management of it was related to the tangible and the built, rather than the innate qualities of space and form. After the new Provincial legislation replaced the old National Acts in 1997, the reference of past assessment by a largely white middle

2. Fielden 1887, p. 14.

3. Russell 1899, p. 148.

class entrenched the heritage discourse, whilst actively allowing for the inclusion of the intangible and associative interpretation, it remained largely focused on the material, thus the built, thus the prominent and predominant.

The heritage sector in the province consists of a number of individuals and groups that have drastically different histories with regards to heritage, and at the same time, differing motives for the practice of heritage. The polarized nature of the built heritages are part of the discussion, as the layers of indigenous and indigenous vernacular buildings have a silent place in contributing to the history of the western and Asian derived heritage and inform from time to time, material, texture and tectonics. These heritages are often dismissed by the formal heritage sector which has its interest in colonial heritage and formal building styles. Much of the forms of the historic streetscapes and skylines are founded on an original nostalgia for a distant land, with more specific practices and a greater social cohesion in the understanding of buildings and aesthetics than exist in a contemporary, or even historical city. Further, Southern African cities were subject to the revival of a pastiche heritage in the 1980s, similar to their counterparts in Europe. This heritage revival competed with a new form of architecture which had taken the rest of the world by storm, namely post-Modernism. This allowed for neo-Victorian touches to buildings, production of accessories with a colonial flavor, and repairs to buildings rather than the new, perhaps influenced by recession at the end of the 1980s. South Africa was a country with foreign influences clouded by international sanctions and a rabid nationalism aimed at protecting the nationalist imperatives meaning that heritage, British colonial settler and Dutch, were used as mechanisms for identity formation.[4] Some of the generation of architectural practitioners at this time formed part of these neo-heritage architects, embedding in their youthful practices an appreciation for heritage without perhaps, ever understanding the embodied symbolism of these buildings and the inheritance in multiple lenses of assessment. In addition to this, the KwaZulu-Monuments Council was formed in the late 1970s to protect the heritage of the largely Zulu sites of association and oral histories than material evidence. So, moving into the new democracy were variant perceptions about heritage: a number of different perspectives on settler heritage, as well as an underlying indigenous perception of space and the construct of identity through story, rather than an appreciation of the tangible in form, space and detail.

The position of the development sector

Many working practitioners in the development sector trained in the paradigm of the historicist / post Modern period, or have had some form of peripheral exposure to the sector. Certainly, contextualism has been an aspect of architectural training for many decades, and site response, in following the tenets of Frank Lloyd Wright, has influenced architectural education for years. Contextualism is a key element missing in the response to many of the new buildings on the Berea particularly, and this is perhaps indicative of the basic training of the architectural practitioners, who may have been educated in a technical route with limited design training, or else developer demand-driven rather than built environment-driven.

4. Schutte 1989, *passim.*

The clients too have changed: over the past two decades the inner city was subject to much suburban flight, and corporate businesses and mainstays of the inner city environment moved to form new cities, particularly to the north and west of Durban. Corporate clients have developed identity too, as a result of globalization and virtual space, making the physical building less important than the brand. Whilst attention remains a close feature of this corporate architecture, it is composed of a predetermined "kit of parts" which suture in with the brand. The old portions of the CBD have in the interim, collected new clients with a different market and priorities compared with those clients that followed corporate leaders from the inner city. Retail by internet has also changed the core of the economic operations of the inner city, and created a mall culture, leaving the gaps to the new clients with a changed market and different priorities. At the same time, South Africa has been in the extremely fortunate position that in the last two decades since 1994 and the election of the democratic government the economy has been boosted by the phantom promise of riches inculcated by the massive expansionism of the Football World Cup in 2010 which allowed the fledgling democracy to avoid the massive economic meltdown of 2008. This perhaps unfortunate event, in retrospect, did not allow for the country, or the man in the street to develop a larger resilience, resulting in the continued pursuit of wealth, and conspicuous spending: what Thorstein Veblen termed "conspicuous consumption".[5] This has exacerbated the "free for all" in the development sector, with pursuing the continued expansion for a bubble which has not burst. Developer driven consortia, often with architects or trained architects at the head, show a distinct disregard for context, sensitivity, and the possible value of the endeavor of the production of old structures, least of all the impact of the carbon footprint in a world increasingly challenged in terms of environmental sustainability. Money driven, client specific projects are certainly not characteristics of the mixed urban fabrics of the past, which allow for continued voluntary habitation by different religious and ethnic residents over time, ensuring the longevity of the building space.

The position of the client sector

Clients too have changed: in the past, a largely homogenous clientele in the suburban areas of the city was determined by access to land and access to money, and that too changed over the years. The passing of the *Native Land Act* in 1913 controlled land purchases by people of colour in certain areas. This coincided with the rapid development of the Berea, and its expansion north and south. Thus, clientele in the major part of the 20th century was white, lower to middle class, and with a nostalgic architectural memory entrenched in the Edwardian, Tudorbethan Revival and the Arts and Crafts. The prevailing styles of architecture as practiced by enduring architectural firms during the period such as Alan Woodrow and Ing and Jackson, reflect this revivalist, nostalgic theme. In addition, the stance of Natal as distinctly British in identity, perpetuated by the Colony's reticence to join in the 1910 Union of South Africa, has a stamp on an architecture that is not bravely Union Period, but a remnant memory of a 19th century England.[6] Clients in the new South Africa have changed: those with necessary contacts with the British realm have diluted to

5. Veblen 2005, *passim.*

6. Thompson 1999, *passim.*

the point of irrelevance, a contested architectural landscape based on technology and gadget has precedent, and a hungry need for resources such as electricity and water. Further, the housing of the automobile has progressed from an *ad hoc* provision in the early 20th century to one in which the car is the centre of the building plan: although Le Corbusier's *Maison Citrohan* (Stuttgart, 1927) did similar, it emphasized the relationship of the new technology to the plan of the building, and did not form the core of the plan of the building as with the drive up apartments popular on a contemporary Berea. The celebration is the integration of the technology and the building, not the inseparable landscape, sky and space – an environment that is purely internal with little reference to its site other than position in an inner city suburb with a consumerist convenience: it could be placed anywhere. Significantly, the notion of position is perhaps the most vital component of this matrix of understanding. Whilst new buildings are rapidly being raised, flouting it seems both provincial and local regulations, the material and integrity of construction is poor. This indicates a need to be in a specific place rather than the specific quality of the space, or its position in the city.

Conclusions

From the position of heritage, a clear way forward can only be achieved by a new understanding of what should be done and how it should be carried out. Fundamentally, the appreciation of the core concern of social cohesion is paramount in establishing what the heritage consists of and being able to define it in multiple ways, rather than in an architectural term which has immediate resonance with an unattainable nostalgia, an unrecognized and irrelevant history, and a perhaps misunderstood historical context. Celebrating space, form, feature and the innate baroqueness of the early and mid-20th century may have more success than promoting the trope of the Tudorbethan.

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