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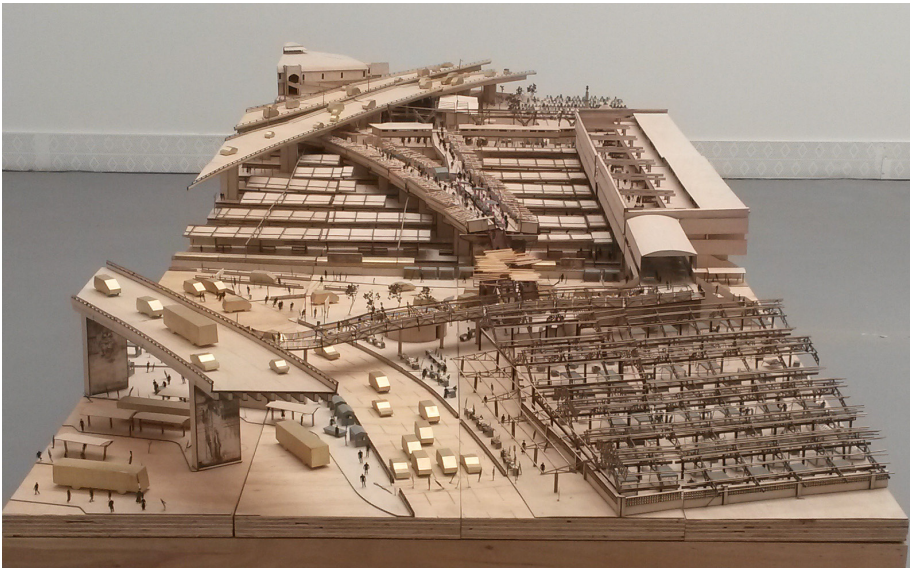
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Warwick Junction, Model. Biennale of Venice 2014. (Photo: Anna Irene Del Monaco).

South African Colonial Architecture and the case of Durban City Hall

An integration of different European architectural cultures

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Abstract: The Bay of Durban was discovered in 1497. The city – founded in the cove – was in a strategic position for trades. However, the municipality did not taste an intense development until the nineteenth century when it was annexed to the United Kingdom. In fact, included in an international trade system, the port the port was challenged by rapid economic progress, which transformed it into the..which rapidly transformed the port in the principal center of the region. The opportunity drew the attention of many workers from all over the neighboring provinces, who moved to Durban looking for a job opportunity. This presence of different communities and cultures fashioned both local life and architecture. The rural houses maintained a connection with Dutch heritage tradition of first colonists, as well as a more formal and monumental style had been imported during British domination in order to characterize the government buildings. In this respect, the new City Hall – built in the early 1900's – with its neo-Baroque-style provided the most stable link to European cultural, developing the model of Belfast's City Hall in Ireland at that time under construction.

Key words: Durban, City Hall, Belfast, United Kingdom, Victorian-Edwardian style.

On Christmas Day 1497, the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama landed in a natural cove which he named *Terra do Natal*. It was the bay of the modern city of Durban. The good morphological conditions and the strategic position – strategic for exports – favored the development of the colony. Nevertheless, only after that the city and its territory were annexed to the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, began the real development of the community which soon became one of the main economic centers of the region.

Some notice about South African Architecture

This growth was not either peaceful, or a straightforward one. It was marked by numerous conflicts and clashes affected by the presence of other social groups, different in costumes and ways of life: Boers – better known as *Afrikaners*, descendants of Dutch natives – who settled down in the region in search of a new home; the urban settlements protected by colonial powers such as the United Kingdom administration which was interested in expanding its influence along the East African coast; and the local natives, called *Zulus*. Really, the *Zulus* dominated the *Costa Natal* until the death of King Shaka (fl. 1787-1828), whose disappearance opened a period of infighting: a political uncertainty which determined the disintegration of the kingdom and finally led to absorption by the English crown in 1844. However, as early as 1824 the port had

obtained from Zulu government the special permission to undertake new activities or enter new markets across borders, thanks to the support of the trader Henry Flynn.¹

After the annexation, the villages clustered around the port were renamed with the collecting official title of “D’urban”, in honor of Sir Benjamin Alfred D’Urban (1777-1849) who was governor of Cape Town and its surrounding areas in these years. The Zulus soon regained control over the bulk of the country’s territory but their influence wasn’t enough to change the name already stable known on the international stage. British rule opened a long period of growth and prosperity. It attracted a large number of migrants, mostly from India and local hinterland, giving rise to a cultural and social infusion which affected above all architecture, to the point that it is possible to state that “the architecture in southern Africa is a heady mix including indigenous domestic architecture (Zulu, Tswana, Khoi), Afrikaner (Dutch) and English settlements, Cape Dutch architecture, Malay architecture (Hindu and Islamic), Republican, Victorian and Edwardian architecture”.²

Even now, in South African rural architecture it is possible to find residences bearing strong Dutch or German influences. One of the predominant features was the intensive use of rounded gable decorations, similar to those used in Amsterdam for the purpose of emphasizing the building entrance. While this typology flourished with these features in South Africa, “gabled architecture had gradually ceased to be built in Amsterdam”.³ This coincidence led to the hypothesis “to localize the true origins of this architecture in an area of northern Europe lying to the east of Holland”⁴ in the direction of the current Germany and Scandinavia, especially involved in foreign trades. This formal detail on the entrance of the residences made the houses appear more grand and important. Consequently, this characteristic was almost certainly the reason for its extensive development and later integration with local and Asian elements. In addition, perhaps, the presence of several groups of slaves imported into the region from eastern colonies to work in the plantations of sugar cane slowed down the updating process of coexistence already in place in the province. Particularly, Cape Town was the principal center of this tendency as is evidenced in a few historic buildings, among which is the *Groote Schuur* residence in the district of Rondebosch⁵ (Fig. 1). Residential buildings were constructed in either a U-shape

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On South African architecture, see PICTON-SEYMOUR 1989, *passim*. FYNN 1969, p. 51. Following a tripartite meeting on July 7 (Finn, Farewell and Shaka), the king granted to British settlers Port Natal: an area of approximately 650000 hectares. A few days later, on August 24, Farewell took formal possession of the land in the name of the British Crown.

2. OKOYE 2002, p. 388.

3. SCHELLEKENS 1997, p. 204.

4. VAN DER MEULEN 1963, p. 51.

5. PICTON-SEYMOUR 1989, p. 93.

(with the front flanked by two perpendicular wings), a T shape (with a single wing positioned perpendicularly to the rear building) or H shape (evolution of a T plan with an additional wing). The addition of wings on right angles and the diversification of these three prototype plans, probably started to take off in the first half of the eighteenth century, although towards the end of the century the H solution became the predominant choice, especially in the countryside.⁶

However, during British domination, the representative architecture radically gave way to a more monumental aim according to Victorian-Edwardian style. This trend took shape throughout the region and was characterized by a clear desire to copy and develop the late nineteenth century architecture of the mother country through a profusion of decorations and ornamental motifs. This is the case of the new Durban City Hall, presumably thought-out in light of the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival in Pietermaritzburg of the first Imperial troops (1893).⁷

The new Durban Municipality

Quite conceivably, the idea of building a new palace took place before the end of the construction of the actual headquarters of the city Royal Mail.⁸ Indeed, the new structure seemed inadequate to local authorities to host the seat of government of the city and its offices, considering the constant demographic and economic growth of the seaport. In 1902 the city started the search for a new site and the decision was to locate the new construction on the orthogonal front to the square on which the new postal building overlooked, in order to create a management center with a strong visual impact. The drafting of the notice of competition was entrusted to the “Borough City Engineer” J. Fletcher, assisted by Mr. W. E. Robarts – president of the National Institute of Architects of the province of Natal – as an independent representative of the public interests.⁹ Both local and Continental architects were invited to submit

6. VAN DER MEULEN 1963, p. 52.

7. The first British troops camped on a hill at the western end of Durban and on September 1, 1843, had begun to construct Fort Napier, named in honor of Sir George Napier (1784-1855), Governor of the Cape Colony. It was an important event in the history of the colony because this strategic complex not only provided a protective military presence but it played a significant part in the social and economic life of the city and the surrounding rural districts (DOMINY-PATERSON 1988, pp. 102-109).

8. Hillebrand 1975, pp.70-71. The first building proposed to host the city government was designed by a young English architect, Phillip Dudgeon (1852-91). Originally of Dublin, this operator was son of Samuel Dudgeon of St Doulough’s, Dublin. He was articled to Lanyon Lynn & Lanyon of Belfast and Dublin from 1867 until 1872 and, after the dissolution of the partnership, was manager and chief assistant to William Henry Lynn (1829–1915) from 1872 to 1875. He travelled for a year before emigrating to Natal, where he landed in January 1877. With the reputation of being one the best-trained architect of the Continental, he acquired some important clients including the Natal Government. He designed the Standard Bank of Pietermaritzburg (1878-83), Maritzburg College (1885-88) the town hall at Durban (1882-85), later used as Central Post office (FELSTEAD-FRANKLIN 2001, p. 65). In fact, following the completion of the new City Hall, the building was sold for £ 17,000 at the post office in 1910 and appropriately converted. Probably, his cultural and artistic education influenced the decisions of the administration which, perhaps for this reason, moved on to the model of Belfast City Hall. In addition, it is important to point out that several Irish design companies also participated in the subsequent design competition for the new building (cfr. infra).

9. HILLEBRAND 1975, p. 72.

their proposals and, in March 1903, twenty-eight sets of preliminary competitive designs were received.¹⁰ In December of the same year six designs were selected for the final competitions and three English architect residents in Johannesburg were declared winners: Scott, Woollacott & Hudson.¹¹ Based on the Victorian-Edwardian style (Fig. 2), their project strongly appealed to the administration through a strong consistency and majestic forms, to the point that the municipality did not hesitate to spend around £ 381,000 for the new complex, nearly eight times what was supposed to cost. Nevertheless, the goal was to make this building not only the center of the political life of the city but also the symbol of the economic strength and wealth of the port.¹² The central position of the complex defined clearly the new monumental image of Durban, turning to a visual reference and an effective vehicle for self-promotion.

Perhaps, for this reason the judges looked to Europe – especially to The United Kingdom – and chose a reference which, in its form, was suitable for these purposes: the Town Hall in Belfast, Ireland.¹³ The Town Hall was designed by Sir Alfred Brumwell Thomas (1868-1948)¹⁴ and was under construction “when Belfast achieved city status in 1888”.¹⁵ Ever since his opening, the complex was considered an excellent example of *neo-Baroque* architecture: a movement which considered that all styles could be admitted at the same time, since each of them was a carrier of meanings and values.¹⁶ In this respect, this result was perfectly aligned with the idea of a mixture of different elements taken from various lexical registers and pieced together in order to create a new syntax: an authoritative language useful to transmit a sense of magnificence and nobility in provincial areas, that were poor in economic resources. The relationship established with the North Ireland construction is evident (Fig. 3). Like the Irish municipality this African City Hall is a single multipurpose building erected on a ground floor of ashlar and pointed out by rhythmical openings characterized by unchanged wheelbase. Four towers on the corners slightly verticalized the composition following a military-defensive approach consistent with the complex political and cultural context. Furthermore, the repetition of the same expressive solution on all the fronts and the rich parietal headings intensifies this sense

10. HENDERSON 1904, p. 207.

11. The other finalists were: W. Street-Wilson of Durban; Wells & Ing. of Durban; H. J. Aldwynckel of Johannesburg; Ewen Harper & Brother of Birmingham; Mitchell, Raine & Payne of London. Finally, on December 7, 1902, the first premium of £ 500 was given to Scott, Woollacott & Stanley G. Hudson; the second premium was assigned to Wells & Ing. (£ 300); the third premium to Ewen Harper & Brother (£ 200). The remaining architects received a refund of £ 100. Cfr. Ivi, p. 208.

12. Moreover, the dominant white settler community had been attracted by the commercial opportunities and relative security of the towns from an early stage of the Colony's history. A third of them were already established in Durban and Pietermaritzburg by the early 1850s and identified the whole region in the city. Cfr. Guest 1994, p. 72.

13. The Port of Liverpool Building, designed by Arnold Thornley (1870-1953) and completed in 1913, is another very close relative.

14. About this architect: BRODIE 2001, pp. 782-783.

15. BRETT 1967, p. 55. The incredible building cost £369,000 to complete and was constructed in Portland stone.

16. MUNTONI 2007, p. 18.

of grandeur and firmness. However, the presence of a pronao with gable and a rear tower with dome strongly emphasizes the central axis and the access, enhances the symmetry and mitigates the massive overall image. This relatively balanced solution influenced the architecture of other City Halls of the region such as Cape Town and Pretoria, giving rise to a successful veritable repertoire of formal alternatives.

The Durban city administration was looking to build a structure that was able to underline both city's importance on the international stage and its multiculturalism. It was an ambitious project that "if carried out in its entirety will provide a Town Hall and Municipal Building on a scale worthy of the Borough".¹⁷ Unfortunately, the huge cost of the work imposed a downsizing of the project originally approved. Moreover, a recession in exports minimized the role of the port in 1905. Consequently, only through the efforts of Mayor Mr. Robert Ellis Brown (1939-45, 1946-47) the completion of the building was carried out. Indeed, the Mayor convinced the majority of local investors of the importance of the yard because, once completed, the new Town Hall would represent "one of the most complete and architecturally one of the finest buildings in South Africa".¹⁸ Thus, the construction proceeded but with the compromise to cover the prominent parts of the building with local stone – as previously established – and to cover parts of lesser importance in cement plaster.¹⁹

The new *palacium civitatis* was officially opened in April 1910 by the Provincial Governor, the Field Marshal Paul Sanford Methuen (1845-1932).²⁰ In the following years the palace played a key role in city life and gradually began to host both government offices and cultural activities such as a museum, a public library and an art gallery.

In conclusion, the modern image of Durban was not only the original agreement of utilitarian and symbolic concepts. The new municipality was a demonstration of urban vitality, even in its peripheral areas: central institutional intentions were integrated with requests of the local administrations like dynamic organisms. This relation did not settle in a simple reciprocal dependence. Architects from the United Kingdom and neighboring countries did not reproduce country's solutions passively. On the contrary, in regional episodes they tried to develop previous acquisitions and reassembled them to personal interpretations, according to a more rigid and hierarchical scheme. Nevertheless, the lack of resources, as well as the absence of an expert on-site supervisor to oversee the workers, gave rise to a product that is heterogeneous and far from the coherence characteristic of British professionals. Up to the present, definitely the City Hall represents the combination of different cultures and attitudes which is the proper characteristic of South Africa and its main strength.

17. PICTON-SEYMOUR 1989, p. 133.

18. MERCURY 1904.

19. *Ibidem*. Up to the frame of the first floor, the building was covered using the local stone of *Natal* while from that point up to the end using the cement plaster. In this respect, the documents indicate that the task was commissioned to the company Cornelius and Hollis of Durban. Their offer was supposedly the lowest (about £ 240,000) to complete the entire work. A local rebellion in 1906 slowed down the construction. Fortunately, the following year the construction started again.

20. PICTON-SEYMOUR 1989, p. 134.



Fig.1. Rondebosch, colonial house.



Fig. 2. Durban, City Hall Postcard.



Fig. 3. Comparison between Durban City Hall and Belfast City Hall.

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