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ECLECTIC ZA WILHELMIENS: A SHARED DUTCH BUILT HERITAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

by KA BAKKER, NJ CLARK, AND RC FISCHER (EDITORS), VISUAL BOOKS, PRETORIA, 2014

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Citation

The prehistory, so to speak, of this publication is completely embedded in the work that some academics did, and still do, in the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria. The immense effort that is exemplified in the pages did not materialise overnight – they are the culmination of years of dedicated work. This is work that stems from a belief and philosophy that the *academe* has a responsibility and a role to play in the unlocking of the mysteries and knowledge contained in the built environment. Such research makes a fundamental contribution in the way that the architectural profession and the *academe* can serve and interact with society, so that all can operate in a better and more informed manner.

In the 'Foreword', the ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to South Africa, André Haspels, mentions aptly:

'If we do not know our past, we cannot look into the future.'

In a similar vein, the authors and editors of the book describe in the 'Introduction' how: '...mapping the inner city of Pretoria/Tshwane strengthened the understanding of, and the need for, a more thorough investigation of the contribution and residue of C19 Dutch engineers and architects to the patrimony of the South African hinterland.'

It was this work, done in order to map and investigate the built reality of their context, that the Department of Architecture took forward into a proposal that was funded by the Cultural Desk of the Royal Netherlands Embassy. This funding enabled a wide range of researchers and senior students in South Africa and the Netherlands to collaborate in unearthing the [necessary] source material, and to produce scholarly work that was published in this form, after double-blind peer review, by both local and foreign reviewers. Most of the source material has also been made available on the digital repository of the 'Africa Built and Landscape Environments'. This means that it is digitally available to all who might have an interest in it.

The publication covers a wide range of buildings and engineering infrastructure projects that still exist, but in a state of neglect and decay, and are thus in danger of being lost; added to those that have [already] been demolished. The thoroughness with which all the examples – from iconic and symbolic to the most humble – have been researched, analysed and placed on record is truly impressive. The generosity with which the editors have included all concerned and able, both inside and outside of South Africa, should also set an example to others.

The production of every building component, the craftsmanship with which they are assembled, and the design expertise and philosophy underpinning the design of the ultimate architectural form, represents a deeply embedded history of culture, social and industrial relations, local and international influences, and memories of 'ordinary' and professional groupings of people. The work published in this book is an exemplary benchmark in the thoroughness, thoughtfulness, carefulness and honesty with which this reality has been annotated.

As with all good and considerate work, it has created a new insight in an authoritative manner. It also reshuffles our accepted understanding of the history and influences underpinning South African architecture and engineering infrastructure. Much of this history predates or just overlaps with the better-known and researched changes brought about by the large-scale discovery of mineral resources (and their exploitation) in the interior of South Africa. The industrialisation, development and architecture that followed these discoveries was largely driven from an Anglophone perspective. Much of our understanding of colonial architecture in the country has also centred largely on early Dutch and English influences. This book fills a gap in this perspective in that, we now know, influences came about from a more industrialised and advanced Holland, as well as other European countries. What is astounding is the evidence of the entire range of international links that were at work in the fragile state of the ZAR in order to establish, at least the start of, a modern infrastructure of institutions and elements such as roads and railways. Much of this contribution still forms the basis of what we now use on a daily basis – albeit being much changed and adapted.

Furthermore, colonialism has in the past and recently been the focus of much negative and destructive commentary and populist electronic hashtag-based movements. We know that the largest part of such popular reactions is based on a superficial interpretation of far



more fundamental contributions, shifts and interrelationships of high levels of complexity. In this publication, at least, one can find a well-researched and argued base on which to place a position *vis-à-vis* the architecture representing colonialism.

Often, when the accolade of excellence is made, it needs to be placed in relation to what others produced at the same time or in previous times. When such recent publications – mostly produced outside of South Africa on local architecture or on architecture, urbanism and infrastructure in

other African countries – are viewed in unison, they pale in comparison. This is due mostly to the superficiality and lack of academic, historical and professional rigour contained in them. In many ways, this largely homegrown publication sets the standard by which others should be measured.

This publication showcases South Africa's rich architectural history. But it also reveals how under-researched that history is, and that academics of this stature can make a contribution to society by allowing all of us 'to know our past'. The book is also written in a manner that makes it accessible to the general population. If we read it with the care and reflection that it deserves, we will all be able to make better informed and considered contributions towards our collective future.

In conclusion, *Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens: A Shared Dutch Built Heritage in South Africa* forms another chapter in the ongoing search for local excellence, international relevance and contribution that defines the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria.