

## SOUTH AFRICA

### Report 1: South African Traditional Architecture at Risk

The architectural traditions of the many Indigenous cultures of Southern Africa may not be regarded by many around the world as worthy of conservation, due to the fact that they are not spectacular or ostentatious in the fashion of the traditions of Europe and the Orient. Nevertheless, in a unique way, they represent the ingenuity of mankind. The adaptation of materials and development of specific technologies created unique forms of shelter, well suited to the traditional institutions and practices of the peoples of the region.

These architectural traditions also present a unique set of conservation problems. The structures, generally built of mud and/or grass over a light wooden frame, are frail and have a transitory nature, rarely surviving longer than 10 years. Building methods are passed from generation to generation via word of mouth and are hence perpetuated only by the existence of a methodology in the minds of the people, that is, as a manifestation of intangible heritage. If the chain of continuity from one generation to another is disrupted by the intrusion of other building methods and materials, it goes without saying that within a very few years a tradition in architecture will disappear very rapidly. This has been occurring for many years and certain building traditions survive only in small, isolated pockets.

In South Africa there is a long documentary record of traditional African architecture, which commenced with descriptions of the houses of the KhoeKhoe, the first detailed commentaries of which date from shortly before the Dutch settled at the Cape in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Today the KhoeKhoe *maatjieshut* (literally 'mat hut'), once found over the entire western half of the country, survives in a small desert pocket in the north-western coastal region. Here, the Nama people still use the structures on a limited basis, more often than not as storage spaces rather than as homes in which to live. Only a few elderly women retain the knowledge of how they should be constructed and few of the younger generation regard them as fitting habitation.

Matjieshut, Khubus, Northern Cape, South Africa: Illustrates the use of shade-cloth, black plastic sheeting, hessian and woven plastic meal sacks in place of the traditional rush mats.



#### Threats

In the case of most other cultures the situation is not quite as dire, but it is probably true to say that all traditional building forms and technologies are under threat. The threat comes from many sources, among which are the following:

- changing values and lifestyle;
- a perception that modern technology (e.g. a steel roof) is by definition better;
- intrusion of urban and global values that demand that housing be square, rather than round, and that a house consist of inter-leading rooms, rather than each household function being allocated to a separate, freestanding structure;
- shortage and/or high cost of, or degree of effort required in collecting and/or processing traditional building materials;
- adaptation of traditions to suit modern materials (e.g. rush-mat roofing replaced by black plastic sheets);
- government commitment to improved standards of living, in particular the bringing of technology into the home (i.e. few traditional buildings are suited to servicing with running water, electricity and the fixtures and appliances that go with them).

It is not the intention of this article to advocate a return to traditional lifestyles. However, it is an irony that the traditional technologies that are being abandoned are for the most part better-suited to climates of the regions in which they exist than is the standardised, mass-housing unit that is being erected across the length and breadth of the country. It is accepted that the dictates of both modern lifestyle and necessity are so entrenched that few long for the 'comforts' of tradition and that there is no turning back. Nevertheless, for heritage practitioners the dilemma of how to conserve the rich traditions of the past remains and is one with which they grapple, traditional western conservation methodology having little to offer by way of solution.

Matjieshut, Sendlingsdrift, Northern Cape, South Africa: Pure form built for exhibition purposes at the entrance to the Richtersveld National Park.







Matjieshuts, Khubus, Northern Cape, South Africa: Illustrates the use of shade-cloth and corrugated-iron in conjunction with very weathered traditional rush mats.

Until April 2000 the national heritage authority had no duty to look into this problem and it was studiously ignored, either for reasons of chauvinism, or out of a sense of hopelessness. New legislation, described in last year's Heritage at Risk report, does make Indigenous architecture and the survey and documentation of traditional architecture a duty of the new authority – the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Through its National Heritage Resources Fund, SAHRA has shown an early commitment to this area by sponsoring a team of researchers who in the second half of 2001 will survey and document the *maatjieshut* and the traditional architecture of the district of Zulu-

land. The project is not only designed to produce data on the status of the building forms under examination, but also to develop a national standard for sustained data collection and to make formal recommendations concerning strategies for conservation of the traditions being investigated.

While this exercise comes too late for traditions that have already been lost, it is a light on the horizon and may be an important exercise in the development of a new methodology specifically geared to the challenges presented by heritage conservation in the African context.

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## Report 2: Table Mountain At Risk

Table Mountain and associated uplands (such as Devil's Peak and Lion's Head) have always been notable features of *The Cape Peninsula* and of *The Cape*. They were part of the landscape utilised on a regular, seasonal, migratory basis by KhoiSan inhabitants for about 1700 years before the advent of colonists from Europe.

Legends suggest that there were various places that were holy to the KhoiSan, while early explorers and navigators from Europe invariably appear to have been captivated by the distinctive features of the impressive array of mountain slopes and the particular silhouettes they provided – these became symbols of the Cape. Colonial settlement and landscape adaptations overlaid past traces of human use on and about the lower slopes of the mountain areas and intensified over the years in sometimes gradual, sometimes rapid, waves of human use, adaptation and developments.

The material constitution, the role, the appearance, and the more specific range of uses of the existing physical form of Table

Mountain and associated uplands are the products of ecological and other historical processes, inclusive of purposeful human adaptations that have occurred over time. Thus, the subject is held to be an inherited 'cultural landscape' to be appropriately nurtured, rather than simply a 'natural landscape' to be returned to some pristine 'original' condition presumed to have existed in some 'golden age' prior to European colonisation.

The main features of the layering of human adaptation of Table Mountain and associated uplands appear to comprise a number of themes, each of which presents a facet of the overall cultural landscape, such as: the *landscape of the Cape Wilderness*; the *landscape of agriculture*; the *landscape of defence*; the *landscape of water*; the *landscape of slavery*; the *landscape of forestry and of recreation* (which introduced a variety of exotic vegetation); the *landscape of mining*; and the *landscape of urbanisation*.



## Conservation Conflicts

We in Cape Town and the Western Cape stand at a cross-roads in regard to conservation of Table Mountain at the present time, because policies appear to relate to the conservation of the Cape Wilderness and not to other aspects of the cultural landscape. In the view of the author, this is the main landscape policy issue confronting the Cape Peninsula National Park (CPNP) Management, the current custodians of this significant area. This management has inherited a situation that, *inter alia*, raises two core issues. First, there is no doubt that one of the finest 'natural' areas in the world has been subjected over the years to considerable degradation as a consequence of damaging invasive vegetation and sometimes improper management and use of the Table Mountain area. In a distinctive and magnificent representative area of one of the six biomes of the world's flora (the Cape Fynbos), a policy of nurturing the 'naturalness' of much, if not all of the CPNP is obviously correct. The issue of indigenous and invasive vegetation is, however, not so simply resolved. After all, there are literally millions of 'people-aliens' who inhabit Cape Town and they cannot be made subject to the simple extermination policy to which alien vegetation is being subjected in the park.

The second issue is that the park of necessity comprises a continuum between an urban domain on the one hand and a wilderness domain on the other, particularly at some of its edges. A broad policy needs to be articulated that goes well beyond merely putting up fences and having different degrees of freedom pertain to use, development and alien and other vegetation on the two sides: the 'inside' and the 'outside'. High and low impact areas, and particularly 'gateway' sites that can accommodate large numbers of users seeking recreation in the park, obviously make sense. What also makes sense is that the CPNP exists as part of a much larger landscape and that it is visually perceived so.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems true to say that most of that which is notable about Table Mountain and associated uplands today results from the maturation of a sensible, artful, and imminently liveable cultural landscape that is the product of the past, and consisted of:

- a splendid natural site, 'partially clothed' by a previously rural, and now an urban domain on the flatter land below, gradually diminishing in intensity of development as it reached up-slope;
- an intervening domesticated, yet rurally forested and landscaped band, visually absorbing some villas, as well as institutions and places of public recreation and outlook;
- the higher fynbos-covered slopes, which merged with the rugged wilderness qualities of the Cape mountains, and which have been enjoyed and perhaps revered by all Capetonians for centuries.

## Towards a Mediated and Balanced View

In conclusion, the matter of an appropriate landscape framework that goes beyond 'wilderness' is elaborated somewhat. For many decades there was a contrived, people-made, 'eco-tone' between the two significant domains of wilderness and urban: in a sense a third landscaped domain existed which had its own characteristics. Much of it was created by non-indigenous vegetation, mainly trees. These exotic trees were part of the cultural landscape of the Western Cape in general and of some slopes of Table Mountain in particular. Their current removal and culling is an issue.

The maturation of the overall scene related to active landscape policies that were followed over centuries. Certainly, in the decades just before and after 1900 this particular humanised landscape was pursued as a matter of clear policy.<sup>1</sup> Since then, it seems that there have been few additions to the positive features of the landscape (other than attempts to eradicate alien vegetation).

For example, the wholesale felling of non-invasive Stone Pines (*pinus pinea*) on the lower slopes of Table Mountain is very debatable. It is not an accident that someone as internationally distinguished in landscape architectural circles as Dr. Hans Werkmeister, on a return visit to Cape Town as a consequence of an environmental and landscape symposium held in Pretoria during 1973, remarked to Mr David Jack (then Cape Town City Planner) that he was appalled that the fantastic landscape that he had so admired on his visit in the 1950s had been allowed to disintegrate to such disastrous effect.<sup>2</sup>

If the cultural landscape is a marriage of necessity and of broader and longer enduring cultural fare, inclusive of artful contrivance with beauty in mind, then we must beware the short-term and 'fashionable' pressures (such as the whole-sale alien vegetation removal fuelled by perfectly understandable, but imperfectly reasoned, and possibly quite narrow-minded and biased 'green' politics). A properly mediated, balanced view needs to inform decisions about these matters. Certainly, purely botanical criteria cannot reasonably be expected to reign supreme to the exclusion of other cultural considerations.

Table Mountain and associated uplands are significant heritage areas for reasons of both 'natural' and 'cultural' conservation. It is entirely questionable that the area be motivated as a heritage site only in regard to the landscape of the Cape Wilderness. A more inclusive policy should be put in place.

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(Based on a report prepared for the CPNP in 2000)

<sup>1</sup> See: Todeschini, F., 1992. 'Cecil Rhodes, Herbert Baker, and the Groote Schuur Estates: the Formation of a Cultural Landscape at the Cape (1890s-1920s)', *Architecture SA*, November/December, pp. 30-36.

<sup>2</sup> David Jack, personal communication.