THE REBIRTH OF A NATION:
AN EMBASSY PROPOSAL FOR
THE SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLIC
in washington, dc

KELLY M. BROWNING | Dr. Paul Emmons, Chair
Dr. Marco Frascari
Susan Pladmont-Palladino

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

College of Architecture and Urban Studies
Blacksburg, Virginia

Washington-Alexandria Architecture Consortium
Alexandria, Virginia

June 2004
A GREAT BUILDING, IN MY OPINION, MUST BEGIN WITH THE UNMEASURABLE, MUST GO THROUGH MEASURABLE MEANS WHEN IT IS BEING DESIGNED AND IN THE END IT MUST BE UNMEASURABLE.

INTRODUCTION

LOUIS KAHN

The Middle Passage for Africans in America can be defined as the transition between a free self-determined people and being the chattel property of brutal plantation owners. The Apartheid in South Africa can also be seen as a transition from freedom and individuality to restrictive and controlling ways of living. In a journey back to the ancestral roots of Africans, it is found that the majority of functions that took place were done as a community, and individuals worked together in communal spirit with the goal being to strengthen the collective chances for survival in the coming years. In the patterns of the South African tribes of The Zulu, The Xhosa, The Swazi, The Ndebele, The Fengu, and The Herero we see this pattern. In the great kingdoms of Mali, Songhay, Ghana, Kemet, and throughout all of Nubia there is the same pattern, and in this pattern we see a respect for life, a respect for the environment, and a respect for each other.

In both South Africa and the United States, the occurrence of certain political and social events have affected the cultural structure of the African society. As the patterns of community have been lost over time, due to colonialism and conquest, the foundations of traditional culture and tribal ritual have also been lost. There must be a recovery from this hopeless state of non-community. In the examination of the growth and development of a culture, it is pertinent to identify how people relate to themselves and other groups as a function of cultural identity. An intricate part of this is the way in which the individuals interact with each other spatially, and as a result of their surrounding environment. The degree to which their culture is reflected in their environmental surroundings plays a significant part in their comfort and satisfaction in their habitat.
Architectural Apartheid and Colonialism

Architecture is the essential factor in creating a sustainable and culturally sound environment for living. One of the most important parts of community is cultural identity. It is necessary to recognize the importance of traditional cultural rituals and teachings in our contemporary society in order to create sustainable communities that are reflective of culture.

PARALLEL COLONIALISM

"Parallel Colonialism" proposes to study the indigenous layer of spatial culture (architecture and urbanism) that survives and thrives. It forms yet another new cultural mix that empowers the indigenous cultures while respecting their history and heritage. The following thesis was studied on three levels: First, by understanding the indigenous and the colonial layers of architecture and urbanism, the traditions and origins of South African culture are brought into perspective. Second, by adopting a philosophical way of thought which opposes colonialism, the lifestyle and way of thinking of the oppressed South Africans are brought closer to the visitors of the embassy, while also suggesting to them versions that need to be dealt with.

The colonial traumas are addressed, and at the same time contemporary architectural forms of expression are consciously used as ways of communicating between individuals, groups, and segments of the population. The architecture will reflect the people and their history.

Finally, by choosing a site in the United States, the way in which both physical and non-physical traditions and beliefs play a part in the contemporary development of architecture, and how "Parallel Colonialism" has enriched the American architectural milieu, are understood.

SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE

The African landscape is closely linked to the heart and soul of all of the people. It is through the people of South Africa that it is possible to experience the treasures of the past, the triumphs of the present, and the dreams of the future. South Africa is a land of contrasts, with people who live a fast-paced, cosmopolitan lifestyle, and rural tribe members who live much as their ancestors did hundreds of years ago. It is essential to recognize the greatly changed social conditions of the present and to create new designs based on inexpensive building materials, combining the old (clay, wood, and stone). The spirit of the past must be revived, renewed, and adapted to the needs of the present.

Perhaps the most important and universal concept in all traditional African societies is expressed by the untranslatable word 'ubuntu', which communicates the thought that an individual is defined not by natural properties or material, but by his/her relationship to other people. This emphasis on the importance of relationships and the community over the individual person may be considered to be manifest in traditional African architecture.
Materializing the Immaterial

The function and significance of each building is not primarily indicated through unique characteristics, but through its placement within the compound and its relationship to the other homesteads.

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Most traditional African compounds are arranged in a circular pattern. Serving a protective function, linked to cosmology and traditional belief systems, often expressing spiritual symbolism, and facilitating many aspects of social life, this spatial organization is deeply linked with cultural values. Spatial relationships or settlement patterns are of crucial significance as an expression of traditional culture. The form of the building is much less significant than the horizontal layering of space throughout the house, which is of vital importance. Africanist does not just mean what buildings look like; it means the igeki, the space in front, the multiple use of rooms, spatial placement of houses to each other. The house is a receptacle into which one withdraws at night or when one needs protection from the elements, a notion that seems to parallel the traditional African thought of the house as a protective womb.

THE HUMAN AND THE HOUSE

Rather than an imposed architectural presence, the house may be viewed as a womb opened up in the earth, with which it is identical. The identification of the house with the womb was commonly expressed by rural women 3 decades ago, when the form of the house was also typically of the round type, and oriented toward the rising sun. Then, greeting the birth of a new day on emerging from the doorway enunciated the principle of regeneration.

The traditional house was not of the cone-on-cylinder form, but consisted of a windowless dome with a low, elongated entrance level, similar to an igloos, from which one emerged head first. The house may thus be viewed as a conceptual work that foregrounds women's labor—both the agricultural labor in the fields and the reproductive, human labor that occurs within the womb of the house. Through intimate metaphors of the vegetal process, the woman marks a coming-into-being; the seed or the nation germinating in the earth hole, the reed shooting from mud.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HUMANISM

We have looked at the building and identified ourselves with its apparent state. We have transcribed ourselves into terms of architecture. The whole of architecture is unconsciously invested by us with human movement and human moods. The humanism of architecture is the tendency to project the image of our functions into concrete forms. It is the basis for creative design. Architecture, to communicate the vital values of the spirit, must appear organic like the body.
U Street
Site Analysis

Detail View of Thurgood Marshall Center
The Mecca of Culture and Tradition

On the edge of the 1792 original city plan by city designer Pierre L’Enfant lies the Greater U Street neighborhood. For nearly 70 years before the Civil War, orchards and grazing land covered the area. When Camp Campbell was settled during the Civil War where 6th and U Streets now lie, thousands of fighting soldiers and freed men and women flocked to the area. The fighting ceased, and many people remained to construct small wood frame homes, churches, and businesses that eventually gave way to the elegant rows of substantial brick townhomes lining the surrounding streets today.

The rise of racial segregation in the early 1900s cultivated the Greater U Street area into a “city within a city” for the African American community, and it remained so until the urban riots of 1968. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a thriving cultural scene, with entertainers such as Sarah Vaughan, Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway, and the neighborhood’s own Edward “Duke” Ellington frequenting private clubs like Bohemian Caverns and other venues such as the Howard, Dunbar, Republic, and Lincoln Theaters. Known by many as the “Black Broadway,” Greater U Street was unique in that many of its institutions — Industrial Bank and True Reformers Hall among them — were designed, financed, owned, and built utilizing the talents of emerging African American professionals as banker John Whitehead and architect John A. Lankford.

The historically close-knit aspect of the community is in fear of being overrun with development and gentrification as progress and “renovation” march northward up 14th Street. It is this “front-porch” aspect of the site that was important for the conception of a reaction to the influx of developer monies and projects.

— Selected excerpts taken from Images of America
The Bushmen of the Kalahari live in small communities seldom more than a score of individuals in number. They are always on the move. A rock shelter, a cave, a hole in the ground, a tree, or a few branches stuck in the ground with or without some grass or skins thrown over will serve the Bushmen. The Bushmen of the Wankie and Ngami build their houses of sticks, over which they stretch mats of woven grass or reeds. The houses are low, seldom more than five feet high, and one has to go on all fours to get inside. They have very little household goods. People in the Kalahari believe spirits come to them during their dances. Though the spirits are said to be evil, they are thought to take away illnesses and to help ease tensions among the people as they sing and dance.

Bushman settlements have no fixed arrangement or orientation, though the open ends of huts normally face east. This enables Bushmen to have the warmth of the sun in the early morning and enjoy shade on hot afternoons. An open area for playing and dancing is a feature for all settlements, and skin, wood, and metal working is usually done in the shade of the nearby trees. Most possessions are kept in their huts. Clothing, beadwork, and medicines are stored in skin bags hooked to the roof of the hut. They sleep on antelope skins and make mattresses of soft grass when the sand is wet. Because they are nomadic their possessions are limited to what can be carried; and the accumulation of wealth is discouraged as it is a possible threat to the unity and harmony of the group. The movement of possessions among members of the group is further encouraged by gift-giving networks. Receiving something as a gift obliges one to give in return, which works against the accumulation of gifts.

The images to the right portray the Bushmen in their natural habitat, gathered around the communal circle, hunting, singing, dancing, and cooking. The image on the following page (page 11) is a sketch study of the possible arrangement of the Kalahari Bushman’s tribal community. The drawing shows an outer wall which encompasses the compound, along with an inner-circle for gathering. The study of the posture of the man sitting in the tree was used to develop a detail for a chair to be used later on in the project.
THE COMMUNAL SPACE

When a Bushman band arrives at a new place, the most important thing they have to do is make a fire. This is the responsibility of the elder. There is a central fire, which is built for the focal point of community affairs (only built when another band comes to visit). The fire is never completely extinguished as long as bands are there. The power of fire can effect an equally dramatic transformation in a man’s mode of being. The lighting of the central fire signifies that the band is not a group of separate families but an organic unity. Lighting the central fire establishes a community.

The following image is a study of the gathering space in the Bushman community. This woman is seen dancing around an area that would encompass a central fire. In the early stages of development, the central space in the South African Embassy was going to be a place for gathering and performing for people in the community. The large brown poles around the circle are exemplary of the trees that would normally surround the circle.

In a further development of the gathering space, the actual huts and spatial arrangement of the living quarters were studied. In addition to housing, details such as the places for sitting were also designed. This image shows a Kalahari Bushman sitting in a tree, and the chair down below is formed through a study of the posture of the man sitting in the tree. The passageway around the communal circle is also featured in a sketch on this drawing.

The Bushmen are a tribe of people who are always on the move. A rock shelter, a cave, a hole in the ground, a tree, or a few branches stuck in the ground with or without some grass or skins thrown over will serve the Bushmen. They often simply make a windscreen of branches right in the open, on the windward side, and usually not more than 3 feet high. It is a semi-circle and they light fires in the opening at night, not only to protect themselves from beasts, but also to warm themselves. They sleep with their heads to the screen and feet to the fire. The image to the right is of a traditional Kalahari Bushman settlement. Note the use of natural materials for construction, as well as the conformity of design.
THE THRESHOLD AND THE VAGINA

The woman’s act of giving birth recalls genesis, as do the house’s symbolic components of mud and reeds in their relationship to the dark inside of earth and the light of dawn. The doorway is the vagina in the architecture of earth. In the woman’s initiation ceremony, her body is made to mirror house and doorway. It is masked by a screen of reeds. Through intimate metaphors of the vegetal process, the woman thus marks a coming-into-being: the seed or the nation germinating into the earth hole, the reed shooting from mud.

The following image shows a preliminary design, in which the main entrance was to be a small opening, leading down a long, dark hallway, representative of the journey from the vagina to the womb.
In traditional South Africa, the house was not considered to be an architectural presence. Instead it was seen as a representative of a woman's womb. The library in the Embassy of South Africa is where the regeneration of the mind takes place, or the rebirth of knowledge. The image to the immediate right is an early model constructed to show the weaving method that would appear around the library, and the image in the bottom right corner is of one of the huts that could be considered as a representation of the woman's womb.

The most important consideration that went into the design of the library space was the circulation around the stacks, with ample access to the books. This image shows the initial ideas behind the design of the library, and as seen in the axonometric at the bottom, the original proposal was for a winding stair to encircle the space on the outside.

This illustration is a view of the library space looking from one of the main entrances into the reading room. This image was only used to portray the scale of the human in comparison to the enormous structure.

The graphite illustration was a study of the possibility of locating the library underground, relating to the woman's vagina as mentioned before. It was also an attempt to invite visitors to 'return to the earth', in preparation for regeneration.
This illustration was an early study of how the institution of apartheid can be translated into the form of a building. The "womb in hand" concept is a metaphor for apartheid. The hand represents the colonialists, and the womb represents South Africa. The hand cradles the baby, and as the baby grows, its mind is molded to reflect the teachings of the dominant individual, or the hand that is holding it. Reading from left to right on the drawing, South Africa begins with the womb (the traditional culture) and as the colonialists mold it, we are presented with the results of apartheid, represented through the veins that form the plan in the drawing.

The arrangement of the buildings on the site is reflective of the human body; and its parts. In this drawing the library is located down the spinal column of the body, with the two buildings of different function and program located opposite one another.

Located at the “head” of the site is the gathering space. The illustrations on this drawing are studies of the outdoor amphitheater, an evolution from the earlier concept of the communal space. The sketch in the bottom left-hand corner shows a section through the site, the gathering to the far left, the library located underground in the center, and the administrative building above ground in the distance.

The translation of a literal concept into the physical form of a building is essential in the creation of true architecture. In this project, the challenge was to design a building that reflected both the history and culture of a Nation, while superimposing not only the architecture, but also the culture on another place. An emphasis is placed on the importance of relationships and the community over the individual. It is manifest through the arrangement of the buildings on the site, as well as through the way that the building meets the site. The function of each building is not primarily indicated through unique characteristics, but through its placement within the compound, in relation to the human body, the most important concept in traditional South African architecture.
PROGRAM AND LAYOUT

The program calls for a cultural and administrative institution which is reflective of the traditional South African heritage, while providing the functional operations of an embassy. Embassies serve numerous purposes, but the most important role that they play is the representative of a Nation. The embassy must provide both public and private spaces, separating employees from visitors. As a result, the layout of the proposed South African Embassy is one in which the administrative functions are located on one axis, while the cultural functions are located on the opposite. The two buildings are conjointed by the performance amphitheater, or communal space at the end of the complex.

PARKING AND TRANSPORTATION

Permanent parking in the South African Embassy complex is restricted to employees of the embassy. There is immediate access to an underground parking garage off of U Street. Visitors to the complex have access to a bus loading zone and car drop-off space, located behind the cultural galleries facing U Street. Guests of the ambassador, as well as handicapped patrons have access to both the underground parking structure, and the above-ground parking lot, with access to the grand ramp on the Northern end of the complex.

SITE ORIENTATION AND ACCESS

Spaces in the South African Embassy are designed to promote gathering and communal activities. The “front-porch” concept is commonly seen throughout the U Street District, in which local pedestrians are invited into spaces through open access driveways and sidewalks. The South African Embassy is designed to anchor itself to the community, while creating an individuality through its position in the earth. Large stairs and gradual ramps located adjacent to city sidewalks are inviting gestures which also provide aesthetic pleasure for those viewing the space.

There are numerous entry points into the site, including a ramp adjacent to the administrative building, a grand stairway facing 13th Street, an access point near the library, and an additional staircase adjacent to the amphitheater. The variety of entry points allow visitors and employees convenient access to buildings of specific interest within the large complex.

A waste disposal area is located on the Northern end of the site, with a convenient passage that turns off of U Street and winds around the rear of the amphitheater.

EMBASSY SECURITY

In the interest of providing a communal space for the patrons of the U Street district, security will be divided amongst the individual buildings, allowing for an open complex 24 hours a day.
preliminary

SECTION
The section at the bottom of the page is taken through the length of the site. The amphitheater, shown above ground, is accessed by an outer ramp, and the subterranean auditorium is accessed by stairs leading from the amphitheater. In this preliminary design, the library was located inside of the auditorium, in one of the surrounding corridors. The administrative building, located adjacent to the auditorium, was to be entered from the auditorium through a restricted elevator.

AMPITHEATER
The original design for the communal space was one in which the amphitheater would be located above ground, and an auditorium located underground. Access to both the administrative building and the galleries on the sides would be from the auditorium.
DISPLAY

The gallery spaces of the South African Embassy are located off of U Street, because of their relevance to the cultural aspects of the area. The display spaces in the galleries are designed so that visitors on different levels are able to share a common space. The galleries are interwoven with and separated by outdoor gardens.
LEGEND

SOUTH WING
1. Library
2. Main Reading Room
3. Library Stack / Storage
4. Librarian’s Office
5. Curator’s Office / Storage
6. Temporary Gallery
7. Private Gallery
8. Alternate Display Space
9. Private Collection Gallery
10. Outdoor Garden
11. Director’s Office
12. Office
13. Welcome Center / Gift Shop
14. Classroom

WEST WING
15. Lecture Hall
16. Kitchen
17. Terrace Seating
18. Administration
19. Office
20. Outdoor Amphitheater

NORTH WING
21. Bar / Lounge
22. Reception
23. Coat Check
24. Water Station
25. Kitchen
26. Pantry / Storage
27. Private Dining Room
28. Outdoor Patio
29. Conference Room
30. Lecture Hall
31. Meeting Room
32. Visa Processing Center

Subterranean Level Plan

33. Office
34. Private Lounge
35. Guest Suite
36. Conference Room
37. Alternate Office
38. Staff Lounge
39. Private Break Room

Subterranean Level 2 Plan → N
ENTRY
The main entrance into the site is located on 13th Street, indicated by a grand staircase flanked with low walls on both sides. The entry point is adjacent to the pedestrian sidewalk, providing a fascinating view into the site. The administrative offices, including the Visa processing center and passport office are the first buildings that the visitor approaches when entering the site. Opposite the Visa center, on the other side of the staircase is the library.

OFFICES
The administrative offices of the South African Embassy are reflective of the traditional teachings of the South African tribes. Individuality is discouraged within the spaces, and stairways and ramps connect the rooms to one another, creating a sense of community and togetherness.
THE REBIRTH OF A NATION

AN EMBASSY PROPOSAL FOR
THE SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLIC
IN WASHINGTON, DC

references

and

CREDITS

Thank You Very Much

true for you and never being silenced. Ever. I am thankful for the people in my life who have heard my voice and seen my vision. I will never forget you. Ever.

Many thanks and special regards

I thank God for blessing me with the greatest family that a person could possibly have. I am thankful for your support through the good and the bad times, and I thank you for encouraging me just as I was about to give up. I thank my friends for sticking with me and keeping a faith in my face. You have been a constant reminder that everything really will be alright. Finally, thank you to my committee members, and especially Jean Holt for seeing even greater potential in me than I was able to see. You are all a blessing and I love you.
EDUCATION
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Masters of Architecture
Full Graduate Academic Assistantship
2004

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University
Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies
Full Presidential Academic Scholarship
Magna Cum Laude-3.54
2000

EXPERIENCE
Virginia Polytechnic Washington-Alexandria Center
Graduate Assistant
Computer Lab Technician
2003

RTKL Associates, Inc.
“World Wise” Fellowship Intern
2001

United States Congress
Congressional Intern
2001

Florida A&M University
Office of Student Activities
Campus Activities Board Director
2000

HONORS
2001-2002 Virginia Tech Merit Award
2000-2001 Architectural Studio Design Award
1999-2000 Virginia Tech Graphic Design Student Award
2001 RTKL Traveling Fellowship Alternate
Golden Key National Honor Society
Phi Eta Sigma National Honor Society
Virginia Tech MAOP Graduate Scholar Program
Florida A&M University Dean’s List
Florida Foundation of Architecture AIA Medal
Alpha Rho Chi Bronze Medal Award
FAMU Honors Program Graduate

MEMBERSHIPS
National Building Museum City Visions
Show/DC Eco-Village Bicycle Program
FAMU School of Architecture Dean’s Council (1998)
FAMU School of Architecture National Accreditation Board
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
Florida A&M University Presidential Ambassador
FAMU Student Government Association Senator
National Organization of Minority Architecture Students