A TIME FOR CRITICAL
BO-KAAP, CAPE TOWN HOUSES
REFLECTION?
ON ELLA STREET

CITY HOUSES

An award-winning project in an historically sensitive part of the city shows new interpretations of local form as well as departures from it.

The prospect for architecture in the ‘new’ South Africa has never been better. The economic boom that the country has been experiencing has created opportunities for the profession that have not been prevalent for a long time. Yet, despite this seemingly positive condition, the demands of client/developer needs bring a curved ball to this phenomenon. Speed, through pressure for immediate delivery, Economic Utilitarianism, in the form of profiteering, and Compromise, in the form of contractor incapacity, among others, are factors that each contribute to undermine these moments of creative potential. The challenge for the profession of architecture, however, remains to engage these realities through their design capability and thereby to contribute in new and transformed ways toward advancing the project of architecture.

Bo-Kaap is a veritable heterotopia. Despite mythical projections of homogeneity, as evident from populist naming, such as ‘Malay Quarter’, and in romantic attempts at conservation and rehabilitation, particularly by the then Cape Town City Council, careful integrative analysis of Bo-Kaap will reveal genuine diversity of both its built form and its everyday lived reality. This differentiation is particularly evident in the examination of the variation of its figure-ground. Developed over centuries, Bo-Kaap has in fact maintained a relative coherency, possibly by virtue of apartheid legislation. However, more recently, this coherency has become contested through unregulated and speculative development that seems to characterise the 21st century post-apartheid city. Genuine and realistic demands for densification of the inner city are being literally interpreted and quantitatively applied. In Bo-Kaap this is particularly evident in the piecemeal development along Rose Street, where the encroachment of the CBD fabric is evident in an array of one-off developments. These bring no contemporary interpretation to extend continuities of urban form around critical issues of the public issues relating to parking, street interface, entrances and the general grain of the quarter. Negating both the formal and lived traditions of Bo-Kaap, these new developments are establishing an altered set of parameters that contest not only the larger idea of the city, but more specifically, and seem intent upon destroying the heritage value of a unique remaining ‘living’ neighbourhood.

Situated in Ella Street, just off the upper reaches of Longmarket Street in Cape Town, the site for these new house-s by Team Architects presented a genuine opportunity for establishing an architecture of location. The combination of uneven terrain with the formidable aspect of mountain, city and sea provide forces which have informed the making of place. Additionally, Bo-Kaap, as an inner-city neighbourhood, presents a unique setting wherein the interrelation between urban fabric and social practice is still evident. Further, these new house-s on Ella Street in Bo-Kaap are important in that they represent a first significant architect-designed intervention in a distinct heritage environment. The project is also important in that its legitimacy has already been established through the recent Award of Commendation by the Cape Institute for Architecture. Similar to other neighbourhoods, where topography provides such opportunity for ‘place-making’, this area of Bo-Kaap is inhabited by a wealthier class. They have better means to access resources and improve their dwellings. Already a number of patterns maybe considered to characterise these improvements. Most obvious is the extended family residence, whereby a single family dwelling is expanded to accommodate the non-nuclear family unit. In Bo-Kaap this tendency has produced a number of architectural monsters, each lacking in the material and spatial coherency of previous extant developments. Another characteristic is that of the mixed-use development, whereby secondary uses have been introduced into the site. Most notably these are directed at economic development through engaging tourism; the advent of new restaurants and bed and breakfasts seem prevalent. Both of these tendencies have introduced further qualities of diversity into Bo-Kaap, especially in its upper reaches, albeit at the expense of urban continuity, where, perhaps, the most virulent adversary of good urban form has been the impact of the motor car.

The dilemma confronting built environment professionals is that of the nature of progress in a materialist world. A question of particular validity is: ‘What are the limits of change?’ or more precisely: ‘Are there any non-negotiables?’ In posing the essential question of ‘how to become modern without losing trace with sources?’, Paul Ricoeur is anticipating a principled response rooted in an appreciation of human, as opposed to material, exchange. The genuine confrontation of this dilemma demands thoughtful and contemplative resolution, and local authorities, heritage agencies, civic representatives, as well as professionals and (educational) institutions that foster critical inquiry have an ethical responsibility to engage and lead debate. Within this context, ‘House-s on Ella Street’ presents an interesting case for examination. The result of a partial demolition and the collaboration between adjacent residential sites, the design presents a reconfigured site that is capable of multiple interpretation. This is evident from various design strategies that have been deployed to enable user choice and formal diversity. Despite the dividing partition wall, the house-s present a formal and tectonic coherence that suggests unity.
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This approach is amplified by the collective grounding strategy that embeds the units in the earth, establishing a collective base from which to build, the alignment of built form in the shape of yards, balconies and gardens affords a collective sharing of front and rear space that visually and formally presents a unified party. As this foundation is vertically developed and extruded, the design introduces and exploits particular conditions of site and program to amplify specific moments within the architectural envelope. In the LHS unit the interior conventional central corridor has been contested to establish a fluid and light filled space of mediation; this inversion affords a kind of ‘public within the private’ and gives both formal and experiential character within the framework of a ‘3-BR home’. On the RHS, the contestation is within the vertical arrangement of functions. Whereas the entry level presents private sleeping arrangements, the lower and upper levels introduce the public and collective ones. This inversion establishes ground for a number of (re)configurations of subunits, or alternatively, allows for one big unit wherein double extended families might coexist comfortably. The introduction of large balconies at the upper levels assists in this by maintaining the traditional courtyard at upper levels.

Despite the accomplished achievement of the architecture, the project establishes significant departures from Bo-Kaap vernacular. On the one hand the introduction of the anterior courtyards establishes new relationships of building with site, context and neighbourhood; on the other the ‘privatisation’ of the entrance sequences establishes ‘suburban’ relations of privacy that cut across the conventions of communal and street-living that is characteristically inherent to Bo-Kaap life.

Contemporary development in Bo-Kaap raises significant questions regarding space and transformation in the new South Africa. The opportunity afforded by political change opened up space for democracy, and given the legacy of the Afrikaner Nationalist Government’s apartheid policy regime, space should certainly be at the forefront of transformation. This concern is paralleled in District Six, on the other side of the ‘city bowl’. In Bo-Kaap, on the one hand, we are witnessing the slow creeping destruction of another city quarter, while on the other, we are experiencing the fruits of change and economic development. What is perhaps lacking, however, is a robust and principled discourse on the nature of change/transformation, particularly in relation to urban form continuity in relation to the imperative and value of sustaining vibrant communities. Currently, in both cases, the role of authority is evident through the absence of real leadership and governance that is central to the triumph of success or failure. Given the laissez-faire tradition that seems characterise Cape Town’s development, the ‘free market’ in its broadest sense will inevitably continue to be dominant.

This project received a CIFA commendation, as well as the Arcelor Mittal Steel Award, at the 2006-7 CIFA award ceremony at the Vineyard Hotel Conference Centre, held in August 2007.

Acknowledgement is recorded for informative discussions with Sadiq Toffa, Bo-Kaap civic member, architect and resident of Bo-Kaap.

ENDNOTES:
1 Most notably the work of Lesley and Stephen Townsend as documented in Bo-Kaap facades and façades – a record of the passing scene in Cape Town’s Malay Quarter with a brief account of its architecture and its Muslim inhabitants, HB Timmins, Cape Town, 1977.
2 Refer to unpublished report arising from methodology studies of the Bo-Kaap: MPhil (Arch) programme UCT 2002/4.
3. This phenomenon may further diagnostically in the general failure of leadership (that) should translate into governance of the public organisations such as the City of Cape Town and the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) et alia.

4. By 'environment' I refer to the Bo-Kaap as a discrete context wherein diverse public and private practices are laid out on a daily iterative basis in relation to a clear dialogue with a precise urban fabric that has been produced form a principled approach design. In other terms, there is a set of collective operational values that underlie and support both coherence and continuity of urban practice; architectural urban form becomes a secondary interpretation of these values.

5. Although there is a tendency to classify all development in Bo-Kaap as gentrification, there obviously exist genuine efforts to sustain/improve lifestyle through leveraging the advantage of property ownership by residents themselves.

6. Despite their community strength, the adverse effects of apartheid excluded residents from economic engagement in the old South Africa. Today the necessity for economic participation and production in an increasingly consumerist society has become imperative for the survival of indigenous community members. The recent hike in Local Authority Rates is a source of community grievance and threatens to impact radically on the local capacity to sustain the heritage and inner city neighbourhood. Indeed the creative resolution of the apparent impasse between the City and Bo-Kaap will stand as a test of both the moral integrity and creativity of the Local Authority and the perceived rhetoric of its current mayor, Helen Zille. However, considering the spatial illiteracy and the economic utilitarianism that drives the present Local Authority dispensation in Cape Town, Bo-Kaap, as perhaps a test heritage site in urban South Africa, remains severely threatened and in danger of becoming a next District Six.

7. That is beside a 60-year age limit in marking/identifying heritage' status.

8. The roots of (this) architecture is a great concern for the integrity of human life in the age of progress and technology sheds light on its problematic focus on Man (sic); Nitzan-Shifman, Aihara: Seizing locality in Jerusalem in Allagyad, Nizar (ed.): The End of Tradition? Routledge, London, 2004.

9. Particularly at schools of architecture, like the University of Cape Town, where the role of critical inquiry, of imaginative speculation, and of design as principled discourse is opposed to triumphalist formalism may be discoursed constructively.

10. The approach of ‘re-interpreting a vernacular’ is reminiscent of Bert Pepler's twin houses in Nutall Street in Observatory, and Scott Johnson's twin houses at the Marina da Gama in Muizenberg.

11. In the form of the diverse structures that 'own' the potential to wield power local authority, heritage agency, community/civic, etc.