WHITEWASHED HISTORIES

Reassessing Cape Dutch Architecture Through Colonial Histories, Conservation, and National Identity

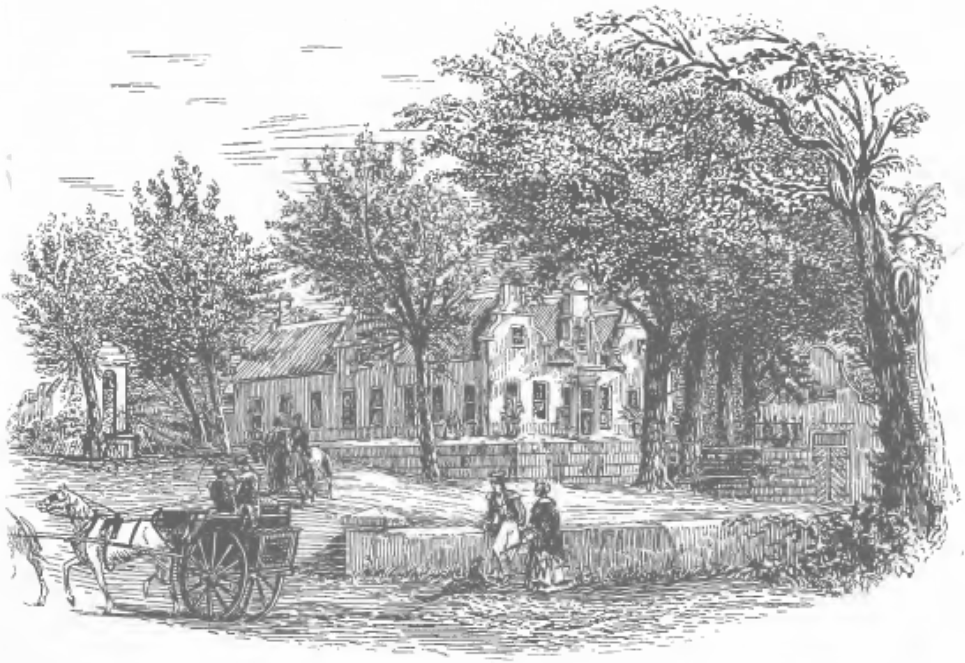

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. RESEARCH QUESTION

How has Dutch colonialism shaped the evolution of vernacular architecture in South Africa, and what ethical and ecological considerations inform the preservation and reinterpretation of Cape Dutch architecture from the 17th to the 21st century, particularly in relation to ***material adaptation, national identity,*** *and* ***contemporary heritage discourse****?*

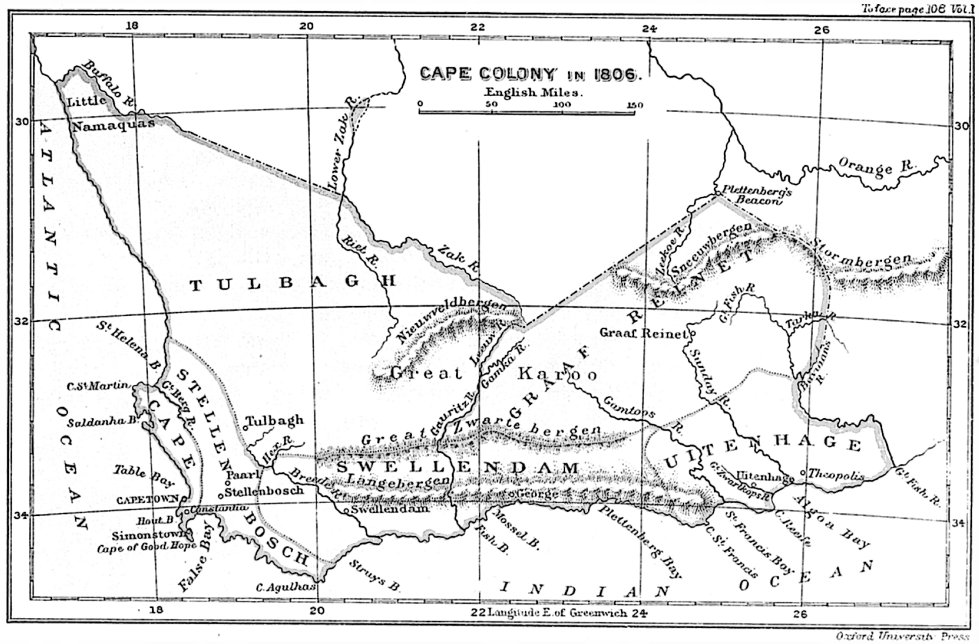


Figure 2 - Map of early 19th century Cape Colony; the area of focus in this research

II. ABSTRACT

This thesis critically assesses the architectural origin and developmental discourse of Cape Dutch buildings in South Africa, tracing back their formation under Dutch colonialism and questioning the ethical and ecological implications of their preservation in the present day. **Structured around the key tension between vernacular adaptation and colonial imposition, the study observes the assumption that buildings constructed under the very real agency of enslaved and indigenous labour have been subjected to historical revivalism and modern conservation practices.** With a focus on archival research, discourses of architects, theorists and writers, and material studies, this thesis observes the environmental substantiation for vernacular materials including clay and thatch, looking at the integrity of modern conventions that highlight aesthetically driven renovation versus viable, historical conservation. Although Cape Dutch architecture has been the subject of deep historical analysis, its ongoing relevance in forming contemporary heritage narratives and conservation strategies remains underexamined.

Furthermore, heritage tourism exudes an additional burden on the redevelopers. This is explored with a particular focus on the revivalist efforts of, namely the architect and significant contributor to the trajectory of Cape Dutch discourse, Sir Herbert Baker, in the first decades of the twentieth century. His role in redefining Cape Dutch architecture as a national style is explored, as well as the implications for British colonial and Afrikaner nationalist identity projects. Additionally, the case studies of Groot Constantia and Vergelegen Wine Estate act to unpack this narrative and underexplored field, through revealing how architectural conservation collides with commercialisation, heritage tourism, and uncertainties of post-apartheid architectural identity. Finally, this thesis surfaces that rather than being preserved only as an aesthetic legacy, **Cape Dutch architecture needs attention as a continued focus of negotiation, one that is evidently aware of its colonial past but also opens space for participatory practices of heritage**. By connecting architectural history to issues of material authenticity, power and memory, this study contributes to broader conversations about how colonial-era architecture should be critically conserved today.

III. INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the layered past of Cape Dutch architecture, shaped by the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) colonial authority of south-western South Africa in the 17th century. The development of Cape Dutch architecture from its origin in 1652, to Sir Herbert Baker's influential revival in the 20th century, to its modern-day reinterpretations are critically investigated through its relationship to vernacularism, identity and perception.

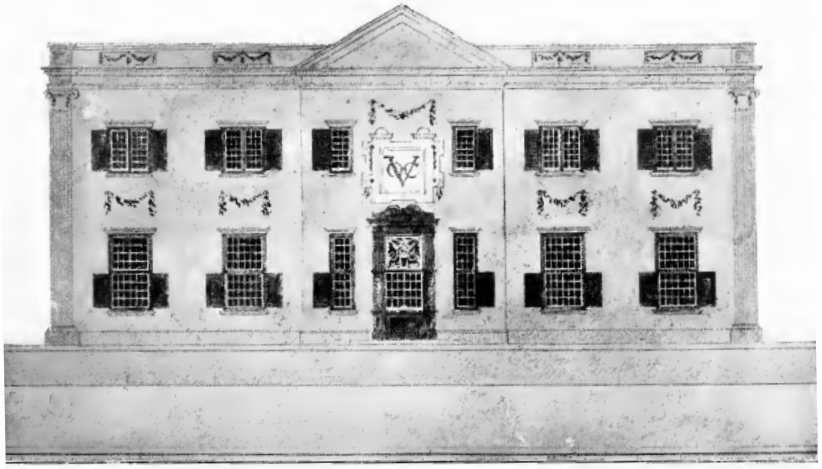


Figure 3 - Government House, Cape Town, built by VOC officials in the late 17th century

The discussion begins by assessing the ecological performance and appropriateness of Cape Dutch materials in their contexts, with scholars such as Franco Frescura (1985) and Amos Rapoport (2006) offering pivotal insights in the emphasis on the performance of vernacular materials such as clay, thatch, and stone. While previous studies have explored the stylistic and ideological symbolism of Cape Dutch architecture, minimal critical observation has been placed on the material changes of these forms, particularly how modern conservation often appropriates vernacular methods with industrial interventions that tend to change the form and message of buildings. This raises ethical controversy of conservation practices, which are examined in this thesis, in relation to heritage policies and environmental considerations.

Moreover, key scholars such as Johan van der Meulen (1963), Christian Schittich (2019), and Johan Schellekens (1997) are foregrounded due to their vast contributions in characterising Cape Dutch architecture as a vernacular form, through its material innovation in climate responsiveness. However, others; particularly Michael Hall (2006) and Nic Coetzer (2021), establish a contrasting narrative, considering that the style served as a mechanism of Eurocentric hierarchy (see Figure 3), built through enslaved labour and the marginalisation of indigenous contributions. This thesis offers cross-analyses of discourses, highlighting shortcomings and opportunities for future academic and practical exploration. These interpretations, and the silences they contain, open critical debate on how Cape Dutch architecture has been historically framed, and the extent to which it continues to embody contested narratives of so-called ***shared heritage.***

In the early 20th century, British architect Sir Herbert Baker played a significant role in reviving Cape Dutch architecture, and therefore architectural discourse surrounding South Africa. In Chapter II, Baker's interpretation can be summarised as a national aesthetic aligned with European classical traditions, subsequently establishing a new national architectural identity and reinterpretation of the style, as seen in Figures 4 and 5. This revival, as argued by Roger C. Fisher & Gerald Steyn le Roux (1989), reinforced colonial nostalgia, altering the historical 'authenticity' of Cape Dutch buildings. Andrew Barker (2012), however, contextualises Baker's perspective within a universal movement, then, of architectural revivalism, challenging that his work was aesthetically rather than politically motivated. The thesis will analyse these conflicting interpretations, considering how Baker's influence shaped national architectural DNA and its implications for contemporary heritage discourse.

The third chapter focuses on contemporary situations, through the analysis of case studies; Groot Constantia and Vergelegen Estate. Prior research has observed how social, political, and economic shifts shaped their architecture separately, without juxtaposing their historical narratives and the ethical intricacies. Both established in the 17th century, these estates reflect European architectural representations, however their adaptations; thatched roofing with local reeds and thick clay walls, as Peter Merrington (2006) explains, showcase how indigenous contributions tend to be neglected in historical discourse.

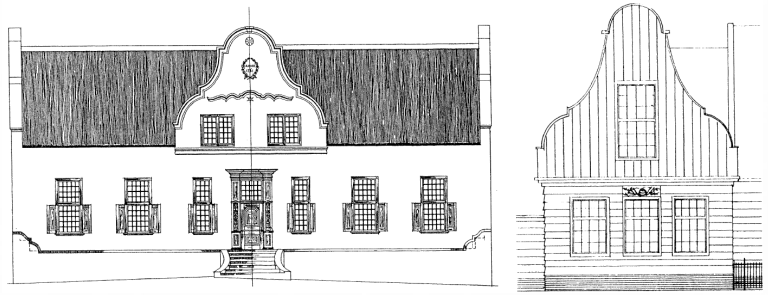


Figure 4 - Left: Elsenburg Country House (Cape Town, 1761) Right: Lagedijk 4, Koog aan de Zaan (near Amsterdam, 1822)

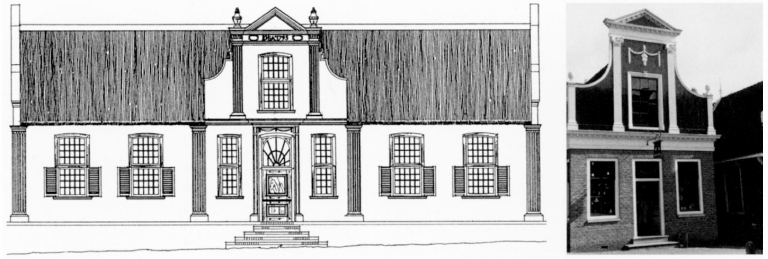


Figure 5 - Left: Rhone, Groot Drakenstein Valley (near Cape Town, 1795) Right: Westzijde 37 (Zaandam, late 18th century)

Collectively, a variety of critical angles is established through following key discourses along the development of historiography of Cape Dutch architecture. As South Africa transitioned through Apartheid, democracy, this thesis raises noticeable absences in critical comparisons on land and identity. This research aims to surface how shifting paradigms demonstrate a range of societal developments, reflected in heritage preservation. Ultimately, this thesis critically observes the limited examination of how architectural injustice persists in contemporary contexts and **how the discourse on Cape Dutch heritage can evolve to foster a more inclusive architectural narrative.**

IV.
CHAPTER I

Colonial Foundations and the Debate on Vernacular Material Adaptation vs. Eurocentrism

Bidstrup, district of Aarhus, Denmark, 1760

Manor house, Ostratorup, Skane, Sweden, 1749

Rectory, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, 1685

Manor house, Boschendal, South Africa, 1818

Figure 6 - Examples of Gabled 17th century buildings in Europe, and later, South Africa

i. Architecture as Colonial Tool: Coercive Hierarchies

The foundation of Cape Dutch architecture in South Africa is seen in the colonial expansion of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the mid-17th century. The Cape Colony was established in 1652 by early Dutch settlers who started building houses that combined familiar European forms and climatic responses in material utilisations to the foreign context. Demonstrated in Figure 6, the Dutch who settled in and around the Cape, as well as German and French Huguenot immigrants, established farms showcasing transported European building customs adapted to their location. The architectural style that emerged, later referred to as "Cape Dutch", reflected this back-and-forth between European precedent and local necessity. Early VOC buildings prioritised pragmatism, using available raw materials like clay bricks, thatch, and timber (Visser, 2008). This form of architecture, characterised by gabled facades, thatched roofs and whitewashed walls, is frequently presented as a vernacular response to local climatic conditions and topography or a construct of colonialism, developed through European rule. Instead, critics argue that Cape Dutch architecture merely epitomised European settler colonialism, establishing spatial hierarchies, dispossession of land, and the forced labour of other people. This continues to romanticise Cape Dutch heritage, an ethical dilemma that begs the question: ***Whose history is being preserved?***

To examine the establishment of this changing typology, its material origins and perceptions are surfaced. The arrangement of Cape Dutch homesteads strongly resembled European farmsteads but evolved to accommodate local South African climatic conditions. However, named scholars argue that these alleged adaptations were not natural developments, but rather enforced adaptations that encouraged European colonisation and reinforced colonial structures of power (Hall, 2006). On the surface, these adaptations are supposed to signify a harmonious vernacular evolution of the architecture in response to the contrasting climate and landscapes. However, many historians contend that these developments were politically driven adjustments serving colonial agendas. Or, as even large symmetrical front gables and central hall floor plans (see Figure 15) seem modified by their local conditions, they were transplanted Dutch design practices (Van der Meulen, 1963). The most notable; being deeper verandas and high-pitched roofs, were designed to give settler comfort rather than adapting them to the use of indigenous more spatial knowledge (Biermann, 1968). The roof trusses and building proportions prescribed by VOC officials, such as Hendrik Van Reede, were standardised and provided references for their construction; a requirement for efficiency in construction but also contributed to the rigidity of settler spatial control (Schittich, 2019).

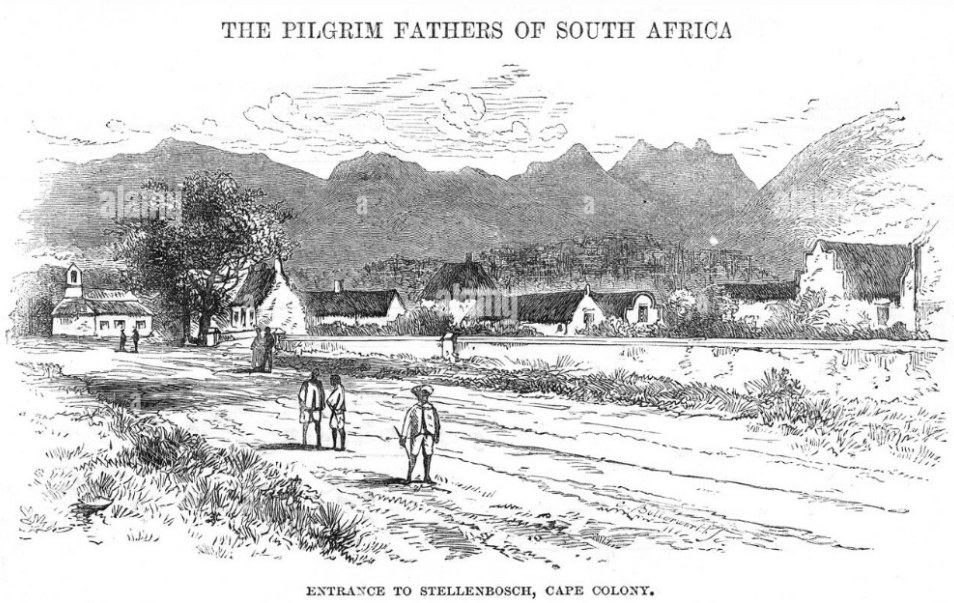


Figure 7 - 18th Century depiction of Stellenbosch (refer to figure 2), a key site of Cape Dutch architecture in the Cape Colony

These colonial farm properties (known as estates) had a hierarchical spatial configuration: manor house in the centre and quarters for enslaved labourers in the periphery of the property (Coetzer, 2021). All the decorative features of the Cape Dutch buildings which allude to European styles, such as scroll gables, and decorative plasterwork, were symbols of cultural superiority (Lucas, 2020), not just stylistic flourishes. As seen in Figure 7, the intentional style alludes to Dutch Baroque architecture, which sustained the settler's ties to their motherland and established visual claims over the land (Barker, 2012). Therefore, highlighted by scholars mentioned in this thesis, **Cape Dutch architecture served as a vessel of colonial identity instead of reflecting local adaptation** (Fisher & Le Roux, 1989).

ii. Invisible Hands

An essential, but overlooked aspect in Cape Dutch contemporary architectural discourse, is the construction of Cape Dutch structures through indigenous labour. As discussed by Merrington (2006), Khoi workers (the largest indigenous community in the Cape Colony at the time) brought competence in roofing and building with wattle-and-daub methods (see Figure 8), while enslaved craftspeople improved stonework and timber joinery. Cape Dutch architecture blended European architectural influences, with localised building design, thus the indigenous population was formed into a working class on European estates. However, mentioned scholars emphasise how Cape Dutch architecture **integrated indigenous labour, yet not indigenous and vernacular identity**, relegating enslaved workers to the position of labourers. The local workforce, made up primarily of artisans from Madagascar, Mozambique, and the East Indies (see Figure 10) provided labour essential to construction (Hall, 2006; Coetzer, 2021), but their contributions are vastly underacknowledged in architectural historiography and discourse. Therefore, these people are often neglected co-architects of this South African architectural heritage (Lucas 2020).

Figure 8 - Depiction of Khoi indigenous contruction methods in the 16th century

Additionally, the voices of these people are not heard throughout discourse, or their contributions minimally identified, an issue that is aimed at being surfaced in this thesis. This is reinforced in the work of Barker (2012) and Sharpley (2020); that **Cape Dutch architecture is too often idealised as South African heritage without discussing the complexities of its construction, producing a Eurocentric narrative of architectural innovation that fails to announce the exploitative social relations through which it was made.**

iii. Material Adaptations & Perceptions

The assertion that Cape Dutch architecture evolved into a 'vernacular tradition' is due to its responsive use of materials to local environmental conditions. **However, this thesis encourages the reader to consider, whose vernacular is it really?**

Examined by Frescura (1985) in Figure 9, a notable contributor to the mentioned discourse, contends this notion by emphasising that thick clay walls gave insulation and thatched roofs provided natural climate control. This argument is in line with Rapoport's (2006) more general theory that vernacular architecture is constrained by ecological and material limitations as opposed to aesthetic ones. However, this interpretation of architecture is criticized by Coetzer (2021) and Hall (2006), as risking neutralising the site's colonial origins. Rapoport (2006) highlights the requirement for conservation strategies that not only maintain aesthetic elements but also uphold the environmental logic of vernacular architecture. However, Fisher & Le Roux (1989) argue that material adaptations, while visually nostalgic of Cape Dutch forms, drift from the material ideologies that described the original buildings. In addition, Van der Meulen (1963) states that gabled facades and formalised farm layouts were not just responses to the climate; rather they constituted deliberate attempts to extend a European spatial order into an alien landscape as a construction of territory in the built environment (see Figures 19 and 24). This critique extends to **contemporary conservation practices, where modern reproductions frequently prioritize aesthetic continuity over material integrity.**

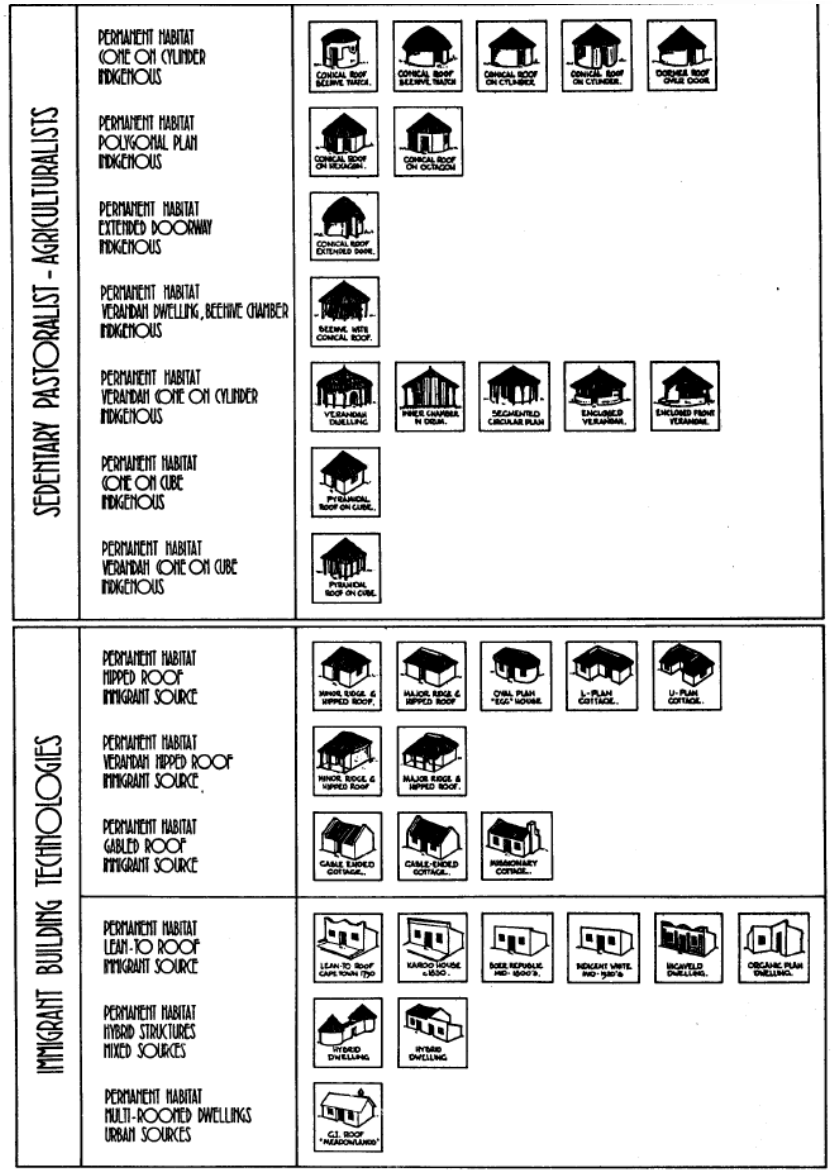


Figure 9 - The evolution of 'vernacular' dwellings in south-western South Africa, indicating the development from in material and form, particularly due to late colonial adaptation (17-19th centuries).

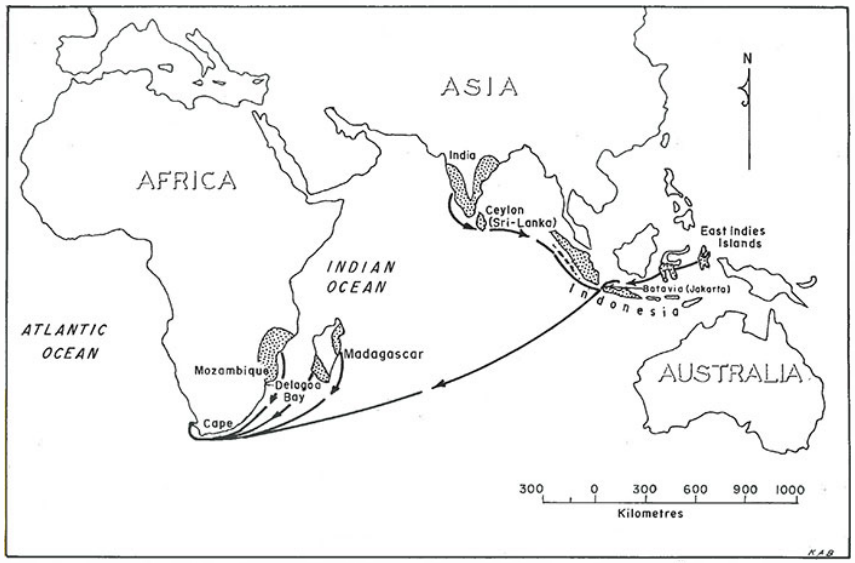


Figure 10 - Key slavery routes to the Cape Colony in the 17th century

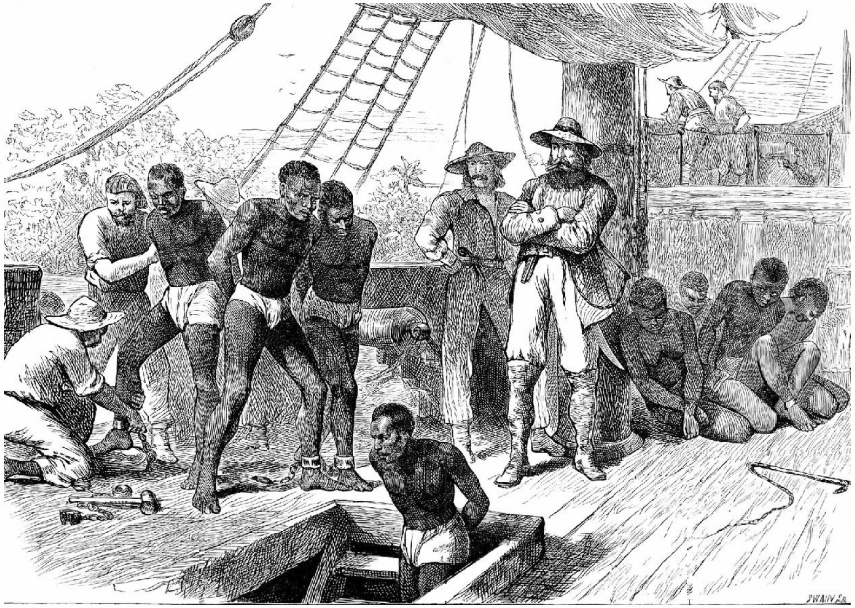


Figure 11 - Famous depiction of slaves being brought onto a ship in 17th century Madagascar

These perspectives surface an intrinsic conflict in thoughts of Cape Dutch architecture: whether it is a environmentally responsive vernacular or an exhibition of colonial supremacy. Although material utilisation analyses demonstrate pragmatic adaptation to climate and local resources, some scholars outweigh this with the belief that the style was used as a mechanism to assert European authority in the Cape Colony. Rather than foregrounding one view, this thesis examines how both environmental logic and colonial intention shaped the architecture; **underscoring that form, function, and ideology were not, and are not, mutually exclusive.** The preservation of these buildings as aesthetic icons, often disconnected from a critical engagement with their socio-political histories, remains an evident tension in conservation discourse; a tendency that, as Fisher and Le Roux (1989) argue, supresses the integrity of heritage practice.

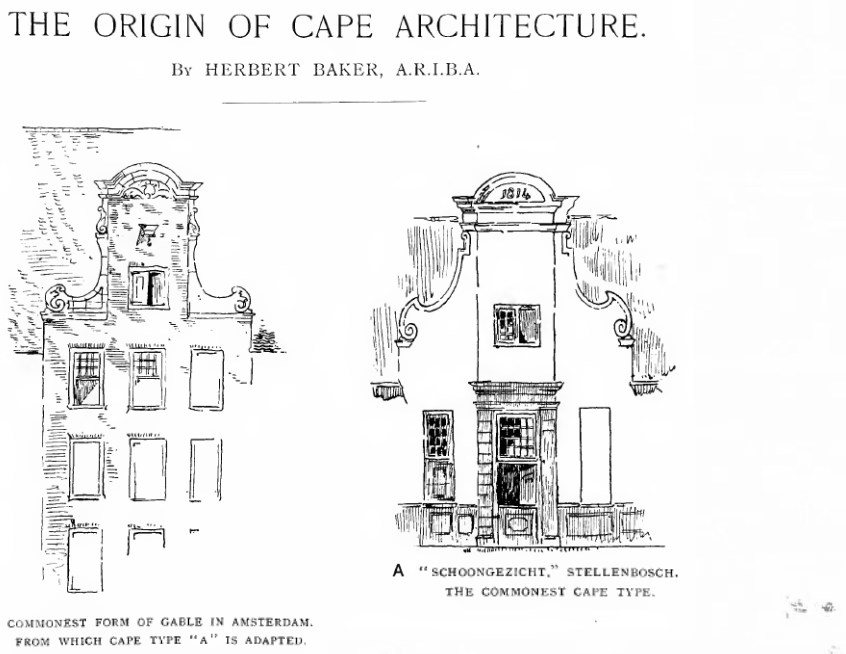
Barker (2012) and Coetzer (2021) challenge those practicing conservation to not just retain buildings in their tangible state, but to uncover the socio-political stories they are built on. In preserving these structures rather than restoring land to displaced communities, conservation practices risk prolonging the exact ideologies that these buildings continue to exemplify. This area of tension translates to the use of modern materials and building methods in contemporary Cape Dutch-style developments. This raises ethical questions about the application of heritage in a contemporary context: **Is it sufficient to preserve the coordinates of a stylistic vocabulary, or must conservation efforts also preserve material logic and historical associations?**

V.
CHAPTER II

The Revival of Cape Dutch Architecture and its Role in National Architectural Identity

i. Sir Herbert Baker & Colonial Nostalgia

The revival of Cape Dutch architecture in the early 20th century, significantly attributed to British architect Sir Herbert Baker, facilitated in establishing South Africa's architectural identity. Upon his arrival in Cape Town from England in 1892, his influence on the typology marked a paradigmatic shift of its employment and perception. Baker practiced a romanticised approach of the style, incorporating a deep appreciation for the Arts and Crafts Movement, which he was well educated in from his time in the UK. Evident in Figures 12 and 15; whitewashed walls, symmetrical spatial plans, and gabled facades demonstrated Baker's desire to avoid rapid industrialisation and to bring back an abstracted 'authentic' vernacularity.



THE ORIGIN OF CAPE ARCHITECTURE.

By HERBERT BAKER, A.R.I.B.A.

COMMONEST FORM OF GABLE IN AMSTERDAM. FROM WHICH CAPE TYPE "A" IS ADAPTED.

A "SCHOONGEZICHT," STELLENBOSCH. THE COMMONEST CAPE TYPE.

Figure 12 - Extract from Sir Herbert Baker's early 20th century 'The Architectural Needs of South Africa', demonstrating the adaptation of the iconic gable in the context of South Africa

Baker originally received commissions for distinguished government buildings and grand residences, using these as opportunities to develop 'polished' Cape Dutch designs. Baker was originally invited by Englishman Cecil Rhodes, the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony at the time, to work at his Groote Schuur home in the late 19th century and was deeply inspired by the forms and materials of Cape Dutch architecture. Baker extended the building from a simple farmhouse into an iconic mansion with grand Cape Dutch gables (see Figure 13), axial symmetry and white plastered walls, transporting a rather humble vernacular into a symbol of power and political identity.

Figure 13 - Sir Herbert Baker's elevations for the renovation of Groote Schuur, showcasing quintessential Cape Dutch details.

Figure 14 - Pre (above), originally built in 1657, and post-renovation (below), completed in 1897, photographs of the homestead of Groote Schuur.

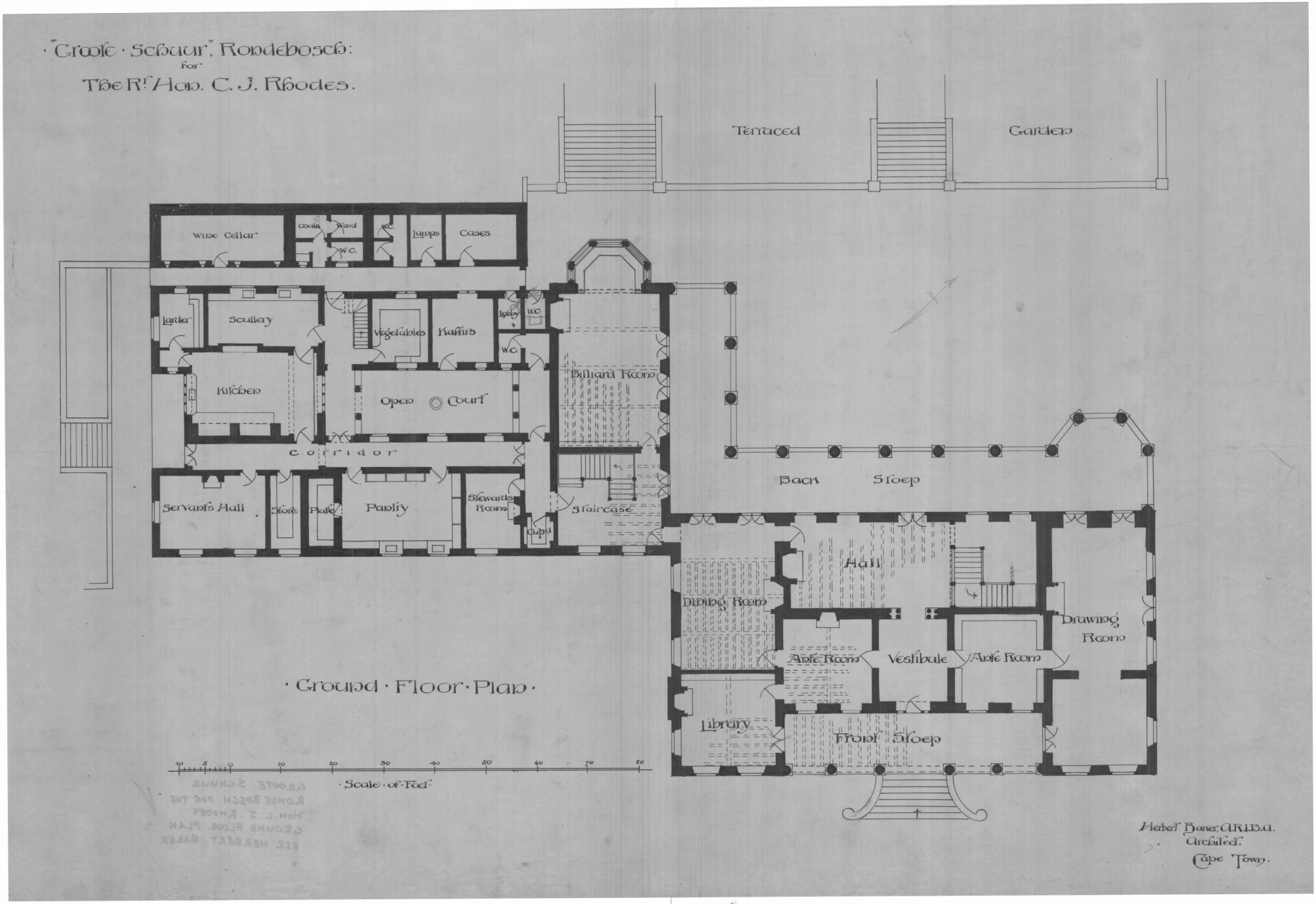


Figure 15 - Sir Herbert Baker's proposed ground floor plan for Groote Schuur (1896)

ii. Twentieth-Century Revivalism and its Consequences

Academics are divided on the motivations and implications of Baker's revival. While some see his efforts as artistically motivated, others point to their unintended perpetuation of colonial nostalgia, and to the removal of vital aspects of the style's historical context. This chapter interrogates those interpretations, shown in Figure 16, considering how Baker's restoration reframed the perception and legacy of Cape Dutch architecture within larger discourses of heritage, nationalism, and conservation. He admired the proportions and craftsmanship and symbolic solidity of Cape Dutch farmsteads. These carved gables, whitewashed walls and timber detailing Baker saw as expressive of a local architectural essence, distinct to the Cape, although he acknowledged European traditions.

This association of Cape Dutch revival architecture with the colonial elite further elevated the style as a cultural signifier of South African identity. Baker's public and private commissions in the early 20th century often incorporated Cape Dutch motifs, which helped to consolidate the style in South Africa's visual and architectural typology.

Despite the personal elements of Baker's life, his revivalist work is still a target for critical examination. **A contested point among scholars is whether Baker's interest in Cape Dutch forms was aesthetic, or inherently political.** According to Arthur Barker (2012), Baker is depicted as a cultural revivalist whose work reflected a larger international agenda of returning to an architectural style, deeply rooted in vernacular forms. This reading suggests that Baker's approach was part of a project of imposing colonialism. His revivalist tendencies were part of a broader pushback against the homogenisation of architecture due to global industrialisation in the twentieth century. They contrast this more agreeable view with that put forward by Fisher & Le Roux (1989), who argue that Baker's adaptations created a stylised and neutralised version of Cape Dutch heritage which erased its colonial and exploitative foundations.

The State Rev 1909: 512-524
by Herbert Baker
'The Arch. needs of SA'

Our early settlers, bringing their traditions from Holland and France, have handed down to us very noble examples of how to build South African homesteads. The characteristics of these are the central house, designed symmetrically with large and simple detail, and long and plain masses of roofing; the range of cellars and slave quarters balancing each other on either side, and the big grass squares and avenues and paddocks of oaks and fir carrying the masses and the lines of the formal architectural composition far away into the landscape. Thus these houses are excellent examples of the principles of the "grand manner" simplified to meet the needs and conditions of colonial life. The charm of these old Cape homesteads lies much more in these larger qualities than in their picturesque detail. This fact cannot be too much emphasised as a warning to imitators that unless they understand and work in the spirit of the old builders they will assuredly fail to advance and establish this or any other style in South Africa.

We hear much nowadays of an original South African style, but it will never be achieved through copying and imitating borrowed detail, but only through impersonal subordination to the larger ideals and conceptions of architecture. We must choose the primitive and more eternal instruments of the art of building, either using the column and lintel alone, as the Greeks did, or combining the column with the arch and the vault and the dome, as the Romans. Then we must use these features, or whatever other we may choose, sparingly and only where necessary, without fear of repetition, which is often the best means of obtaining that most valuable quality of architecture, namely, rhythm. We must welcome rather than shun bare wall-surface, which is a quality of all great architecture, though rare chances of it are given by the exigencies of modern buildings. "Great spaces washed with sun"

are a characteristic of our landscape. It is the South African architect's privilege, and one much envied by his fellow craftsmen in northern Europe, to have always at hand the most valuable of all materials for his craft (which the Greeks and Romans also had), warm sun bathed wall surfaces contrasted with deep, cool shadows.

The northern architect in a dull or cold climate, and dim atmosphere, rightly seeks for wealth of detail and warmth of colour, on his chill and sunless facades. This is the explanation of the pleasure derived from the mixture of red brick and white stone on a building in England or Holland. But in the bright and warm atmosphere of South Africa we turn with relief from such parti-colour buildings to plain, cool stone walling or to the shadow-chequered whitewash of the old Dutch houses at the Cape.

In the newspaper criticisms of new buildings of South Africa they are often described as "of the Renaissance style." The real "Renaissance" style in the different countries of Europe, when architecture was being re-born and deserved this name, was an attempt, enthusiastic but often ignorant, to revive the forgotten forms of classic architecture. The earlier Renaissance architects were often pedantic imitators of detail, seeking the letter but missing the spirit; and if we go too much to them for our ideals to-day we are but copying the copyists, an unprofitable and hopeless task indeed. The great masters in the Renaissance period, such as Michael Angelo and our Wren, thought of detail as wholly subservient to the nobler principles of construction and planning. Through sincerity and faithfulness to the ideals which I have here tried to express lies the best hope that South Africa may give birth to a national architecture worthy of a great nation.

HERBERT BAKER.

Figure 16 - Extract from Baker's early 20th century 'The Architectural Needs of South Africa', highlighting his key Cape Dutch revival hopes and beliefs

iii. Cape Dutch as a Symbol of Invented Tradition

These contending descriptions reveal how revivalist architecture can work as an act of cultural recovery and a form of selective memory. Baker's revival had resonance that far exceeded ideas about architectural theory, it infiltrated national identity formation. As South Africa moved into the Union period under British rule and then under Afrikaner rule, Cape Dutch architecture became ever more emblematic of a single national heritage. Baker's reimagination gave an attractive visual vocabulary that British and Afrikaner elites could both adopt. This desire for a coherent architectural expression of an otherwise poorly defined national identity was evident in the adoption of Cape Dutch forms for civic buildings, schools and government structures during the early to mid-20th century.

As South Africa became part of the Union in 1910, and then the Afrikaner government, Cape Dutch architecture experienced a shift in its perception of the people, no longer being viewed as a building style but as a national symbol of status. This makes one contemplate, transcending this context, how connected are buildings and power? Were these buildings, e.g. Groote Schuur, used to represent power and ideological constructs? Furthermore, were Baker and his associates pushing for colonial supremacy? If so, Baker reconsolidated the typology as an 'object of national heritage', a tangible marker of nostalgia that established a disconnect from dispossession and exclusion. One could argue that by labelling it as 'national' heritage, an evident contradiction is revealed, implying unity and collaboration, not exploitation and displacement.

Ultimately, the architectural object in this context refers to the cultural and political artefact; not particularly associated to neither form nor function, but rather its ideological and social function in South Africa.

Baker's re-examination was not a simple retelling of the form but a re-purposing of its meaning. Baker reframed Cape Dutch motifs in new civic and domestic spaces and changed their symbolic meaning. Originally associated with colonial farms and built by forced labour, the style was later repackaged, by the revivalist agenda, as a timeless symbol of national heritage. Merrington (2006) challenges this by explaining that this transformation compounded the marginalisation of indigenous voices and alternative histories, which included accounts of dispossession and economic exploitation of land.

While Cape Dutch architecture holds an enduring presence in heritage tourism, elite real estate, and institutional architecture reflects the revival's success in embedding Cape Dutch imagery within the national imagination, critical questions are raised:

Does such symbolic prominence justify the continued replication of a style so deeply rooted in histories of oppression?

And should the redevelopment of these estates today proceed without re-evaluating the ethical implications of their colonial foundations?

VI.
CHAPTER III

Contemporary Perceptions through the lens of Case Studies; Groot Constantia and Vergelegen Wine Estate

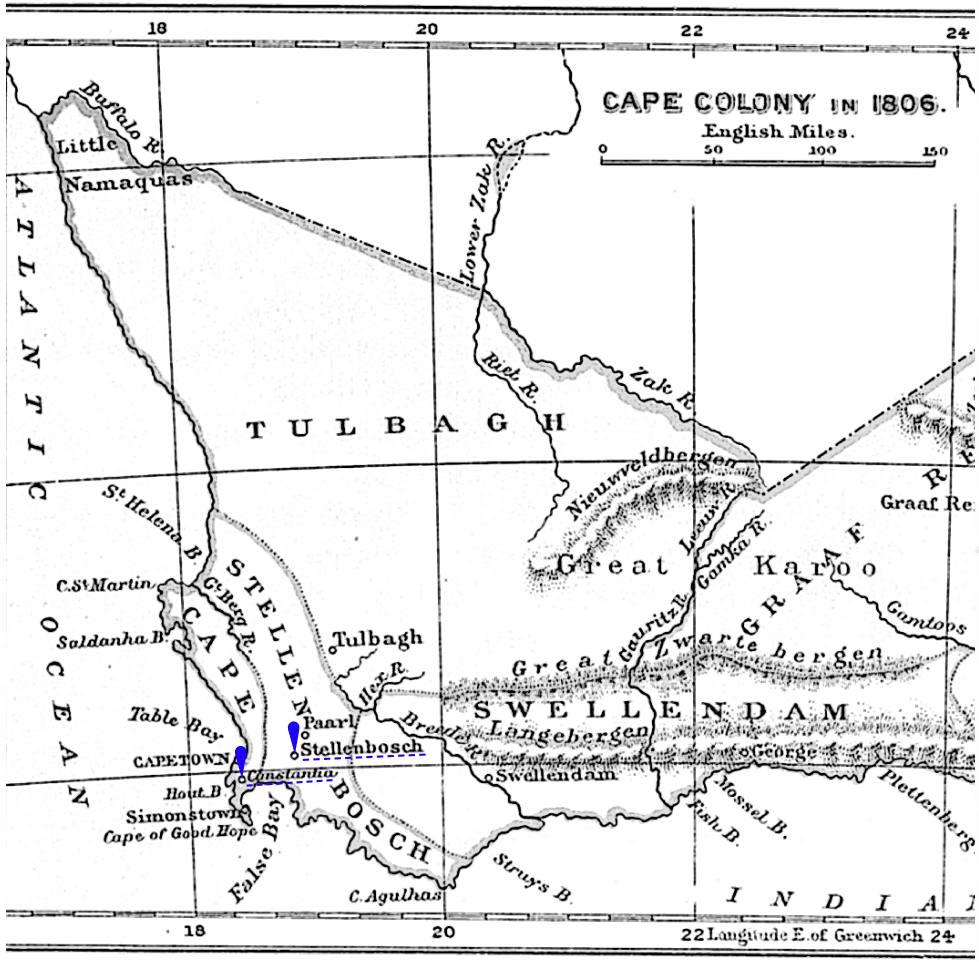


Figure 17 - Map of early 19th century Cape Colony; illustrating the locations of the two key case study estates of this thesis; Groot Constantia (located in Constantia) and Vergelegen (located in Stellenbosch)

i. Conservation Agendas: Preservation over Performance?

This chapter continues the critical examination of Cape Dutch architecture by focusing on two prominent 17th-century estates: Groot Constantia and Vergelegen, observing their contemporary functions as commercial heritage sites. Their adaptations are analysed in relation to earlier discussions of material authenticity, colonial legacy, and architectural symbolism. These case studies are significant not only for their historical prominence, but for how their meanings have shifted over time. **Often romanticised as heritage landmarks, this thesis prompts critical questions about whether such sites should be reinterpreted, altered, or preserved in light of the colonial histories they obscure.** This chapter examines the present-day utilisation thereof, as well as whether restoration practices include these histories fairly, or risk reinforcing aestheticized, exclusionary narratives. Now vastly acting as museums, wineries, and tourist sites (demonstrated in Figure 20), these estates are prominent examples of the ways heritage management reinforces or contests dominant narratives.

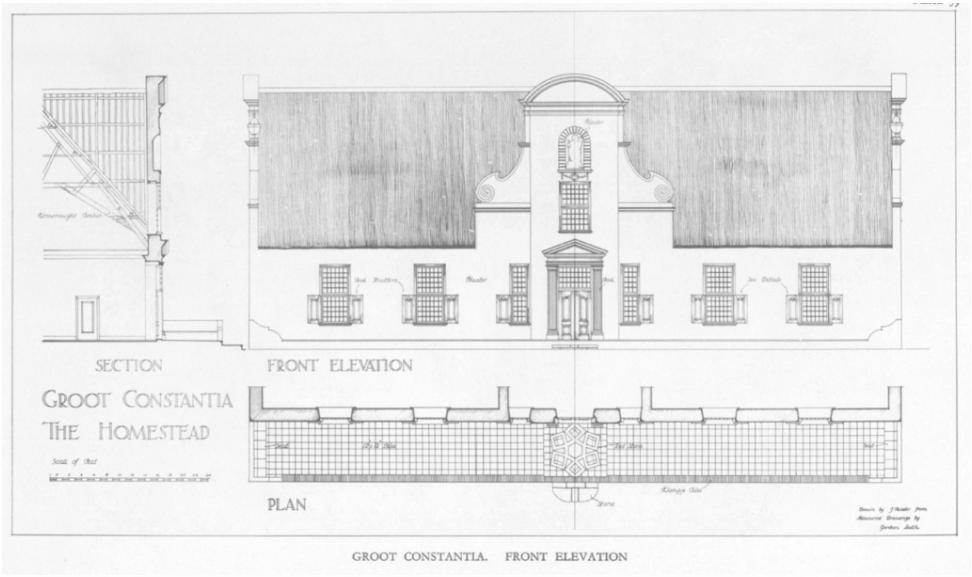


Figure 18 - 17th Century proposed drawings for the primary homestead of Groot Constantia

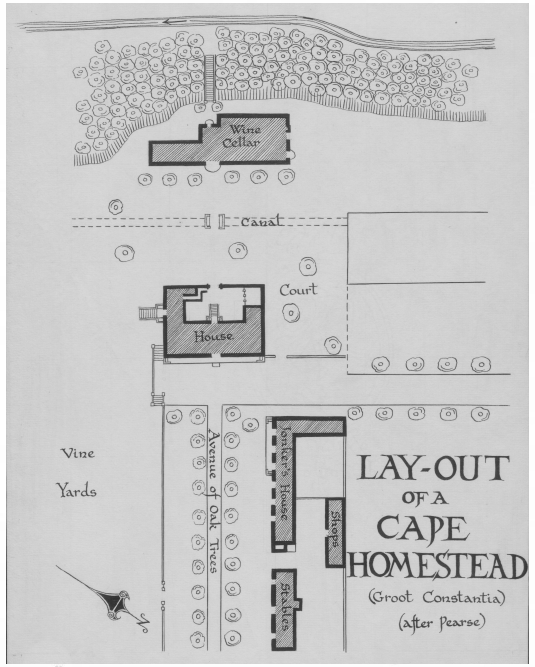


Figure 19 - Original 17th century layout of Groot Constantia which remains identical today ('House' is refered to as 'primary homestead')

Figure 20 - Contemporary photograph of primary homestead of Groot Constantia and part of Jonker's House's (now restaurant) outdoor seating area

ii. Subsequent Material Choices and Historical Integrity

Groot Constantia is often displayed as a representation of South Africa's colonial past. Originally built in 1685 by Simon van der Stel, the first Governor of the Dutch Cape Colony under the VOC, a key role was played in shaping the colony's agricultural economy and land distribution policies. His acquisition of Groot Constantia was not merely personal; it symbolised the VOC's vision of perpetuating European agricultural and cultural permanence at the Cape. The significance of Groot Constantia in this thesis is further substantiated by the influence of Van der Stel's interpretation of Cape Dutch spatial planning in the late 17th century, which was later reinterpreted by Baker in the 20th century. Van Der Stel introduced his Dutch interpretation of the template for Cape farmsteads; defined by axial planning, centralised residences, and ordered landscapes that reflected European ideals of land mastery.

Shown in Figures 18 and 21; its gabled architecture, symmetrical plan and deep veranda carried a through Baroque style reinterpreted for the Cape's climate in materials: thick clay-brick walls and steep, thatched roofs. Romanticised as the quintessential expression of Cape Dutch architecture, Groot Constantia is often framed by imagery of oak-lined avenues and mountain backdrops (see Figure 19). However, what consistently remains excluded from general architectural discourse in South Africa, which this thesis aims to surface, is a critical view on how aesthetic appreciation masks Groot Constantia's roots in enslaved labour and the appropriation of local building materials with those perceived to exemplify modernity; a reality overlooked in heritage narratives (Hall, 2006). This raises the question of whether it is appropriate to engage with these sites through leisure and aesthetic appreciation, when their deeper histories remain underrepresented.

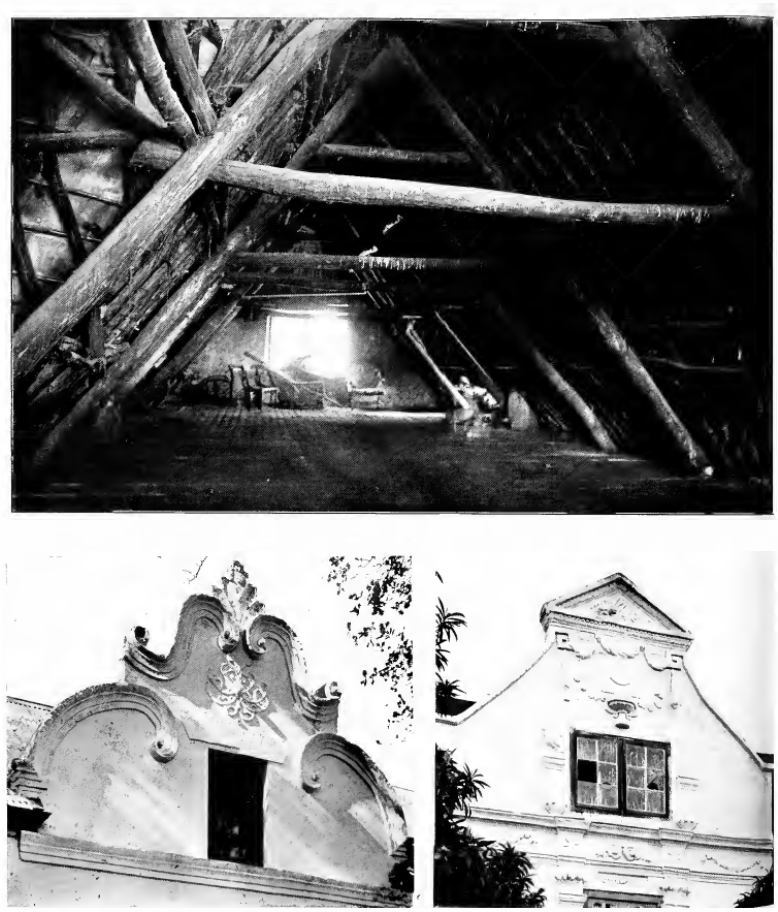


Figure 21 - Internal construction of the Groot Constantia's primary homestead's gabled roof (above), two key types of gables at Groot Constantia (below)

Referring to Figure 22; after a devastating fire in 1925, restorations often included modern materials like reinforced concrete and artificial finishes. As Rapoport (2006) suggests, this counters the environmental rationale inherent in original vernacular methods. Their work leads to the ethical contradiction proposed by Fisher & Le Roux, that is, whether historical accuracy should be sacrificed for durability, or if restored monuments bearing the legacy of colonial foundations and sustainable practices should take their rightful place in the category of heritage.

Although Groot Constantia introduced a museum in 1969 in one of its buildings, its portrayal of the estate's colonial and enslaved past remains limited. Ultimately, Groot Constantia has historically placed an aesthetic emphasis on conservation, normalising a Eurocentric perspective that potentially prioritizes built form over its historical context. These renovations likely ignore indigenous contributions, romanticising settler preferences and supressing important histories of slavery and land dispossession (Barker, 2012).

Figure 22 - Depiction of the reconstruction of Groot Constantia's primary homestead after the 1925 fire. British architect Franklin Kendall led the project. He focused on restoring the building to as close to its original Cape Dutch style as possible, rebuilding the thatch roof that caused the fire to rapidly spread.

Vergelegen offers a much more commercialised model of conservation. Built in 1700 by Willem Adriaan van der Stel, it embodies essential Cape Dutch characteristics, axial layouts, symmetrical façades, and vast agricultural lands. But unlike Groot Constantia, Vergelegen has been remade as a luxury destination, using its architecture to accommodate fine dining, wine tastings and cultural events (see Figure 26). This ensures preservation of physical form, but often at the sacrifice of historical context. Scholar Mark Watt (1988) describes such estates as involved in an operation of "architectural packaging for elite consumption" that commodifies heritage in the form of a product devoid of critical interrogation. According to Fisher & Le Roux (1989), this devalues Cape Dutch architecture to a fashionably marketable code and serves as a catalyst for colonial nostalgia. Coetzer (2021) critiques this focus, arguing that restorations highlight the visual coherence of a site while obscuring its more complex, layered histories.

Barker (2015) emphasizes that historical integrity is sometimes compromised for modern functionality, and must consider historical integrity. At Vergelegen, colonial origins are sometimes neutralised to maintain marketability. This decontextualization risks perpetuating settler centric narratives, stripping the architecture of its socio-political meaning (Sharpley, 2020). Both estates are symbols of broader tendencies in South African conservation discourse, where material preservation frequently masks historical truth. Schellekens (1997) exclaims that, though Cape Dutch architecture was possibly adaptationally vernacularized, it remained a representation of European spatial and cultural supremacy (refer to Figure 24's legend). Conservationists are therefore divided in ethics of retaining the physical heritage and dealing with its colonial histories.

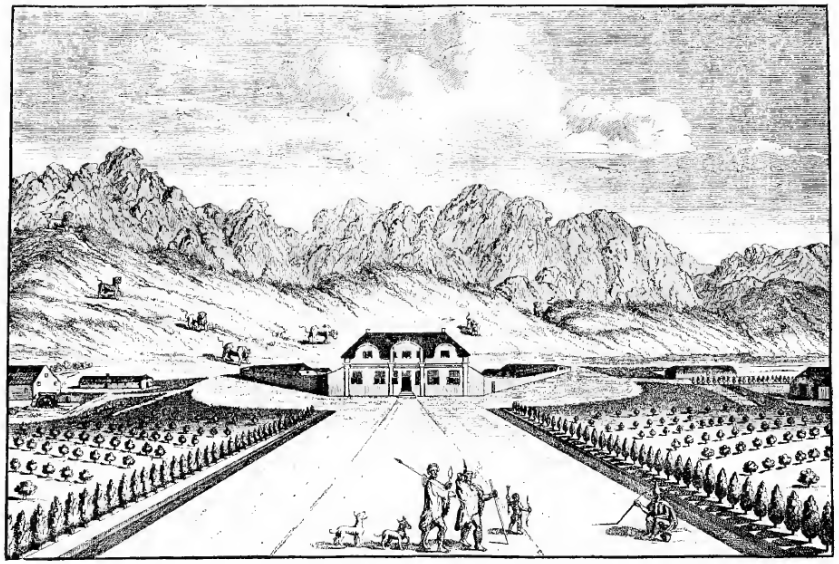


Figure 23 - Late 17th century view of the primary homestead of Vergelegen, produced by Willem Adriaan van der Stel, the second governor of the Cape Colony

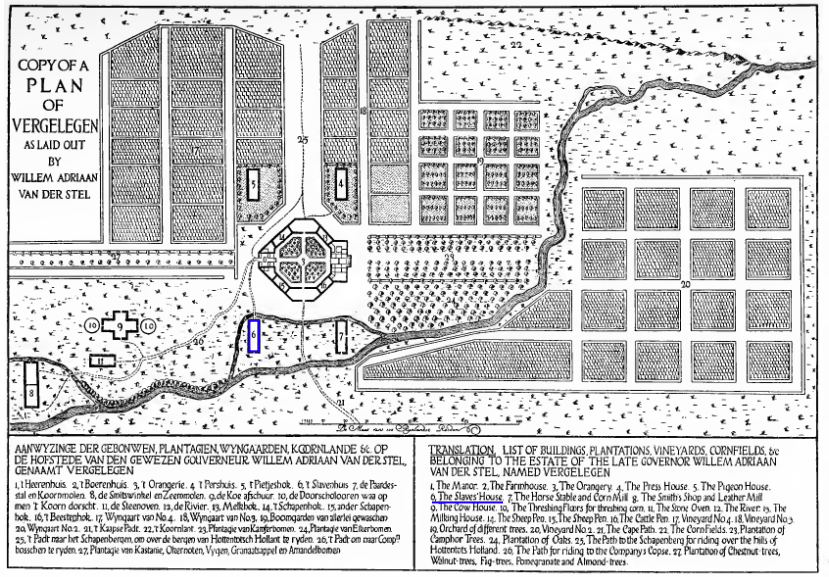


Figure 24 - The corresponding plan to the perspective view, (Figure 23) demonstrating the traditional layout of Cape Dutch estates; with 'The Slaves' House' (6) on the periphery of the colonisers' homesteads

iii. Postcolonial Heritage in Commercialised Sites

These buildings are often framed as icons of South African heritage without interrogating what power structures they represent (Lucas, 2020). On the other hand, Frescura (2020), advocates for inclusive practices of a tangible heritage that forefront not only indigenous, but also enslaved voices, stepping away from Eurocentric narratives. The experiences of Groot Constantia and Vergelegen underscore the complexities of conservation efforts for Cape Dutch architecture. **The overarching aim of this paper is one of context preservation; ensuring that these structures can talk about all of history they embody.** Antonites et al. (2021) urge treating such sites as "critical sites" rather than "thingified monuments." This approach invites memory, with these estates as more than aesthetic markers, but places where history must be engaged with the discomfort of its legacies (see Figure 25). The reflection of these scholarly perceptions encourages the reader to consider how broaden conservation frameworks can incorporate indigenous input in the future of Cape Dutch interpretation.

Figure 25 - Photograph of the Vergelegen's primary homestead today, serving as a historical museum with a key focus on enslavement on the estate

On-site exhibitions of indigenous forms have been promoted by Schellekens (1997) along with engaging descendant communities in decision-making. This would also assist in countering the Eurocentric framing that currently shapes such stories. As roofing materials like thatch and clay become more difficult to procure, restorers are turning more to modern standbys. Appearance over substance, Rapoport (2006) cautions, threatens the vernacular authenticity that once gave these buildings their identification. Instead, a potentially more balanced approach might blend contemporary sustainability with historical fidelity, providing durability of use with fidelity of interpretation.

Figure 26 - Photograph of the contemporary function Vergelegen's Manor House, now acting as a hotel and restaurant

The ongoing celebration of Cape Dutch architecture as a national heritage style continues to present tensions. Barker (2012) and Coetzer (2021) warn that even uncritical idealisation of these buildings serves to reinforce exclusionary histories rather than interrogate them. In the context of re-evaluating how Cape Dutch architecture is framed and protected, **contemporary discourse needs to make efforts to break down colonial narratives and encourage a more equitable understanding of South Africa's architectural history**. The task for the future of Cape Dutch architecture, which this critical angle aims to exemplify, is to unite conservation with critical engagement, to turn heritage from a passive celebration of form to an active conversation with the past.

VII. CONCLUSION

In South Africa, the history of Cape Dutch architecture signifies an intensely disputed heritage constructed through overlapping discourses of vernacular accommodation, colonial appropriation, national symbolism, and postcolonial legacy. The direct consequence of the three chapters of this thesis is the understanding that this architectural style cannot be described in singular terms. Rather, it resides in the overlap of power, identity and preservation; **a cultural artifact that invites never-ending interrogation**.

The thesis first surveyed the rise of Cape Dutch architecture over the 17th and 18th centuries in South Africa. Although often praised for its adaptation to climate and use of local materials, the style was also consolidated on colonial power, reflecting European spatial hierarchies and built through the exploited labour of enslaved and indigenous people. This dichotomy: between the vernacular-functioning and colonial ideologization of building materials and vernacular architecture, complicates the classification of a 'shared heritage'.

This leads to the ethical dilemma that is also at the centre of the conversation: How much of such a building needs to be preserved, and under which narratives? Understanding their injustice is vital to making sense of their importance today. From this, the second chapter turned to the 20th century revivalism of Sir Herbert Baker and his contemporaries. While some academics see this linking as part of a global aesthetic movement, others claim Baker's romanticisation of Cape Dutch forms entrenched colonial nostalgia. By unpacking these structures from their extractive bases, the renaissance helped shape a unifying architectural palette for settler elites; one later embraced by Afrikaner nationalism. These figurative reuses, aesthetically pleasing even more than disturbing, issued the style from its already distressing origins. The chapter demonstrated that heritage is not just about preserving the material but also about the power of its narrative. Revivalism supressed histories it, as encouraged in this thesis, are vital to be revealed, idealising Cape Dutch architecture as a contradictory symbol of **national pride**.

This tension between aesthetics and accountability, examined in Chapter 3, is continued by reflecting on contemporary case studies. Examples like Groot Constantia and Vergelegen show how conservation practices mindfully trade engagement in history for a visual impression of authenticity. Although there is increasing pressure to recognise the significance of slavery and the displacement of indigenous people, these tend to be a suggestion of a powerful narrative that positions Cape Dutch fields as travel destinations.

The challenge and wish, now, in Cape Dutch architecture, is to elevate the collective interpretation above superficiality. Conservation cannot merely romanticise buildings; it requires addressing power hierarchies that buildings symbolize. Therefore, without it, potentially in the case of Groot Constantia and Vergelegen, **heritage threatens to be commodified nostalgia**. The legacy of Cape Dutch architecture therefore is determined not particularly by its stylistic coherence, but rather by the contested histories it continues to uphold. Preservation, thus, is no longer a commensurate end-point to the estates. It now requires a negotiation, a compromise, consideration of continued maintenance now is to be seen as an active responsibility, intrinsically tied to the ethical and historical complexity of the past.

VIII. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

‘Cape Dutch Architecture’

A style of architecture connected to Dutch colonial settlement in the Cape Colony. This typology is identified through its gabled facades, whitewashed walls and symmetrical layouts.

‘Vernacular’

Refers to the local materials and construction methods commonly practiced in their specific context. In this case, the utilisation of thatch, reeds and clay were considered vernacular materials pre-colonialism, commonly used in housing construction by the Khoi. In this thesis, the vernacular is adapted due to colonial influence. A key question raised from this thesis is whether or not Cape Dutch architecture can be considered vernacular to South Africa as it is built on appropriation?

‘Colonial nostalgia’

Commonly connected with Sir Herbert Baker’s work, this term implies a sense of romanticization, or idealisation of the practices carried out in colonial history, often neglecting its negative connotations.

‘Shared heritage’

This term implies a sense of unity and collaboration in the establishment of a historical architectural style as a nation, however, this thesis highlights that this is deeply contradictory as Cape Dutch architecture is built on exclusion.

‘Architectural object’

In the context of this paper, a Cape Dutch style building is seen not just as a built form, but as a symbol of power and colonial identity.

‘Material authenticity’

The authenticity of materials refers to how ‘vernacular’ materials, such as thatch, reed and clay, were appropriated by the Dutch with modern versions, implying the materials are no longer contextually authentic.

‘Revivalism’

An architectural movement that looks to bring back old traditions or styles. This is seen in Sir Herbert Baker’s reappropriation of Cape Dutch architecture.

‘Ideological rebranding’

The change of an architectural style or typology to meet new cultural or political themes, supressing painful histories in this context.

‘Spatial hierarchies’

The method of developing a floor plan that associates more value to certain spaces than others. For example, there is an evident authority structure in the designs and organisations of estates such as Groot Constantia. Where the slave quarters would be on the periphery of the estate, not overlapping with the centre for settlers. In doing so, the Dutch established an order and supremacy in their planning systems.

‘Constructed memory/invented tradition’

As demonstrated in Sir Herbert Baker’s work, the perception of Cape Dutch architecture was morphed by establishing contemporary agendas or narratives.

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X. ILLUSTRATIONS BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Figure 2
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Figure 3
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Figure 4
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Figure 11
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Figure 12
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Figure 13
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Figure 17
Theal, G.M., 1897. South and East Africa. London: Cassell & Company, p.122. Reproduced from the British Library via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 18
After G.E. Pearse. Source: Culture Connect South Africa, 2021.

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Figure 20
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Figure 21
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Figure 22
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Figure 23
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Figure 24
Fairbridge, D., 1922. Historic houses of South Africa. London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press.

Figure 25
Author's Own (2024).

Figure 26
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