Wilhelmiens in peril

Use, value and relevance of the eclectic legacy

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The remnant built fabric of the Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens era in the geographic area that encompasses the former ZAR has its source in three categories of endeavour: (1) the Department of Public Works of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (DPW), (2) the rail and ancillary development of the NZASM, and (3) those architects and draughtsmen of Dutch birth and training engaged in private practice. The sheer number of structures that have survived from this era has astounded the researchers of this project; testimony to the ability, skill and hard work of architects, contractors and labourers. Some of these were engaged in a personally profitable manner: white architects, contractors and craftsmen, while others, black labourers, were often forced through vicarious means to contribute their energies (See Chapter 4, The 'Departement Publieke Werken'). A full inventory of Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens structures has not yet been compiled and would be a mammoth task to undertake. This is one of the factors that threaten these valuable assets.

Four categories of threat can be identified which pose a threat to the future survival of this inheritance. First and foremost is the aforementioned lack of knowing. Even in the nation’s administrative capital there exist unidentified buildings, bridges and places, many still in continuous use, their origins obscure and their importance unnoticed. South Africa provides for blanket protection of all structures older than 60 years through Section 34 of the National Heritage Resources Act, but in order to enforce this protection, the age of structures needs to be known. A full inventory of Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens structures has not yet been compiled and would be a mammoth task to undertake. This is one of the factors that threaten these valuable assets.

Secondly, neglect and lack of management – including maintenance – and institutional capacity, which is unfortunately most prevalent where this heritage is in governmental or public institutional control, forms the second threat. Often simple maintenance is lacking, for instance in the case of road bridges such as the Begin-der-Lijn, Wierda, or Zandspruit bridges (See Chapter 5, Road bridges of the ZAR). Neglect is often the result of an inability to develop new uses for obsolete buildings within the strictures of these slow-moving and mission-specific governmental goliaths.

Thirdly, urban decay could be construed as another form of neglect and lack of management but has its own vectors and cycles which operate on various scales including economic, social, urban and regional scales. Many towns and cities started experiencing urban degeneration due to Apartheid era forced removals and later exacerbated by the relaxation of Apartheid era strictures before the transformation of South-Africa to a democratic and equitable society. Especially the larger environments of station precincts have been hard hit and are not managed, as they should be, by railways authorities and local authorities alike. The national decline of rail as a passenger transport system has contributed to this degeneration.

Where the heritage is cherished and maintained a fourth risk emerges; a well-intended act of restoration can jeopardise heritage value. This is most prevalent in the private realm – especially dwellings. Here expert advice can assist but experts also require the correct knowledge to be able to make informed decisions. This can be countered should institutional advisory bodies be created as open information sources to the public.

This photo essay, which deals with Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens in peril, is structured and the threats explored according to the four categories above. Note: Unless otherwise mentioned, all structures were photo-documented in 2012–2014.
Unlisted and unknown

09.02 DPW: WF Nkomo (Church Street) bridge over the Steenhovenspruit, Pretoria. The much-altered bridge is still carried on sandstone piers, its sandstone balustrades obscured by later plasterwork. Is this a now forgotten ZAR-period construction? The archives have been silent until now. This simple yet effective bridge, designed for lighter loads, still carries heavy traffic, including municipal buses and construction vehicles, travelling along one of the main roads into the city centre on a daily basis.

09.03 DPW: Bridge over the Skinnerspruit in Rebecca Street, Pretoria-West. This unknown bridge, typical of ZAR DPW construction and typology, does not occur on the list of specifications of the ZAR DPW located in the National Archive in Pretoria (NASA, TAB, File PWW 166(1)). It might have been included in contracts for the construction of either the Leprozeninrichting naby Pretoria (Westfort Lepper Institution) or the Westfort (Fort West) itself. An original composite steel truss structure supports a now tarred deck over which traffic thunders. The original balustrade railing has been replaced.
09.04 NZASM: Undocumented remains still forming part of current South Africa rail infrastructure – here supporting a deck carrying trains following the South-Eastern Line over the Grootrivier in Mpumalanga. Will this and all similar in-use structural elements pass muster during a next phase of rail expansion?

09.05 DPW(?): Chalet Style building (warehouse/stables or even bakery?) of unknown date, but stylistically and in construction detailing part of the C19 Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens, located in Francis Baard (previously Schoeman Street), Pretoria, now in use as church. The mists of time have obscured the origin of this, the largest known Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens warehouse in the city.
09.06 NZASM: Railway Residences, Platrand, Mpumalanga, occupied but not maintained: side-lined when rail trajectories were altered.

09.07 NZASM: Station – Markgraafspruit. This station, forgotten in the veld, became obsolete when a new rail trajectory was constructed and is in use as a house. This is a unique and intact station well worth preserving, and why not as domestic accommodation?
09.08 Private Practice: Chalet Style commercial building (?) in Celliers Street Sunnyside, Pretoria. This curious, much altered double storey building has escaped comment dealing with heritage in Pretoria to date.

09.09 NZASM: Zandspruit Station – once used as shop and now abandoned. What will the future hold?
Known, even legally protected, but mismanaged or neglected

09.10 (Left) DPW: Westfort Leper Institution – The mostly intact interior of the c.1892 Klaas van Rijse designed octagonal church with its original pulpit still in place. Church services as well as community meetings take place here on an ad hoc basis, although the building is not maintained or secured.

09.11 (Top right) DPW: Westfort Leper Institution – one of a small number of hospitals, this dating to 1892. The structure has been much altered over the course of its useful life, is now occupied, but its beauty clearly reduced.

09.12 (Bottom right) DPW: Westfort Leper Institution – residence for senior staff. This is a well-maintained and seemingly cherished house. With future residential development planned around and in the Westfort Leper Institution site, its future dignity is in the balance.

09.13 (Left) DPW: Leprozeninrichting nabu Pretoria, (Westfort Leper Institution) houses for nurses. The Westfort Leper Institution, a site falling under the custodianship of the South African Department for Health but earmarked for residential redevelopment, has since its abandonment been illegally occupied by a homeless community who have made both the site and the heritage their own. The future of this site could be secured through interaction with this community, but will require institutional flexibility on behalf of the responsible authorities as well as a clear understanding of the tolerance for change inherent in this magnificent site.
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09.14 (Far left) DPW: Staatsartillerie. Burnt-out stables that form part of the larger ZAR DPW military complex. An army without mounted troops does not require stables. The subsequent adaptive re-use of this building did not provide for its sustainable and valuable use. Careful thought needs to go into the transformation of the entirety of this unique complex.

09.15 (Left) DPW: The ZAR Government Printing Works, Pretoria. Having served the country for over 100 years, this fragile building is now moth-balled, its future undecided. Its significance and location call for its transformation in open civic service. This will assist in the transformation of the whole north-western quadrant of the historic Pretoria city centre.

09.16 (Top right) DPW: Volksrust Magistrates Court, ownership unknown, thought to be national. The lack of use and subsequent lack of curating has lead to the stripping of all floorboards from the building; sections of the roof have been dismantled but it still holds opportunity to contribute to societal endeavours.

09.17 (Bottom right) NZASM: Staff Housing, Klerksdorp. This whole complex still falls under the custodianship of the South African rail authority that presumably lets the houses to tenants. One hopes that the history and significance is understood by the current owner and that will be explained to new owners should these and all other NZASM period houses be transferred to private ownership.

09.18 (Left) DPW: Staatsartillerie officers’ housing, abandoned and vandalised. Some interior fittings such as fireplaces and ceilings remain as does the original garden fence and gate manufactured by FW Braat of Delft, the Netherlands. It is an important part of the larger ensemble of officer’s houses, worthy of restoration and requiring urgent securing and stabilization.
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09.19 (Left) NZASM: Staff housing, Boksburg. A rare remaining example of row-house typology from the NZASM era, saved for now by financial need that has lead to their unaltered use and a lack of resources to allow for their modification.

09.21 (Top right) NZASM: The school for children of NZASM staff at Volksrust, part of the unique ensemble of NZASM infrastructure in the town, abandoned and unsecured, awaiting pillaging and decay.

09.22 (Bottom right) NZASM: Volksrust Railways Staff Housing, occupied by tenants, who have not yet been able to take ownership. The occupants are not maintaining the houses nor their environment and the current custodian is not fulfilling its obligations either.

09.20 NZASM: Volksrust Station and Old Customs House. A very disconcerting sight, this whole station has been stripped of all recyclable parts, metal or otherwise, leaving a skeleton of stone and remnant timber, this despite the fact that it is legally protected as Provincial Heritage Resource under the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999) having been declared as National Monument under the now repealed National Monuments Act of 1969. (Government Gazette No 12142, 20/10/1989). This can only be put down to severe negligence on the part of the custodian of this heritage resource.
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NZASM: The Telegraph and Signalling Office, one of the few remaining C19 structures of the Pretoria Station precinct was left standing open when a tenant vacated the premises at the end of their tenure, allowing for its wholesale stripping, including the removal of a Blue Plaque commemorating its significance. It is still standing in a precarious state of repair, its future re-use hampered by the encroachment of both road and rail.

NZASM: Elandshoek Station, photo dated 2007, a declared National Heritage Site under the repealed National Monuments Act of 1969 (Government Gazette no 12142 of 20/10/1989) is therefore by default legally protected as a Provincial Heritage Resource. This building has been systematically denuded of all its useful elements – be they as construction material or for sale as scrap – by an adjacent immigrant squatter community in need. No action has been taken to either secure or restore this resource, nor has any legal action been taken against the wrongdoers.
Urban decay leading to neglect and threat

09.25 DPW: The Old ZAR Museum, Boom Street, Pretoria, was the first home of the National Cultural History Museum, now part of Ditsong Museums. A declared Provincial Heritage Site (Gazette No 6153, 15/09/1978) this building has been standing abandoned and awaiting re-use for more than 20 years. A unique feature is the British Coat of Arms, carved in Stinkwater sandstone, in its central pediment. This is the only remaining such emblem on a public building in Pretoria.

09.26 (Right) Private Practice: The Kings Hotel, Potchefstroom. The core of this hotel might be by the hand of HC Luitingh who acted as chief supervisor for the ZAR DPW in Potchefstroom before the Second Anglo Boer War and later continued as town engineer (See Chapter 10, Wilhelmiens aftermath and legacy). Its stepped gable has been partly obscured by insensitive later additions, but close inspection reveals its original charm. Road widening in front of the hotel has spatially dislocated it from the kerkplein (church square) onto which it once faced. A lack of confidence in the inner city has brought a withdrawal of investment, which has further exacerbated its precarious position.

09.27 (Below) Private Practice: Hotel, Standerton. Little is known of this hotel, although its styling shows clear Dutch architectural influence. It stands in the vicinity of the original NZASM Standerton station precinct; its size and prominence in its environment a clear indication that it meant to serve rail passengers. Today its houses a tavern and liquor store, its immediate environment in decay where long-haul coal trucks thunder past and park on disused stands where once buildings stood.
Private Practice: Private Residence in Burghersdorp, Pretoria West. Few people still recall the name Burghersdorp, now subsumed into the appellation Pretoria West, yet it is one of the earliest suburbs of the city. In writing the history of urban development of the city is often overseen due to the continuous expansion of the city towards the East. Yet the West was once a respectable middle-class suburban area, housing amongst others civil servants. This whole area has seen a turn for the worse, partly due to the widening of Vom Hagen Street as part of the N4 highway system which has brought scrap and second hand car part dealers to the area, depreciating property prices and driving out long term residents.

Private Practice: c.1900 housing ensemble off Madiba Street (previously Vermeulen), Pretoria. This jewel, remnant of a larger complex of single and duet dwellings, is located on land earmarked for redevelopment as housing of which the inner city has a desperate need. The houses are occupied but in a neglected state of repair, yet the spatial intent of this group, arranged around a central yard, is still legible. It can only be hoped that future development will restore them to former glory, respecting and reinforcing the original spatial intent of this, one of the earliest known planned private housing complexes in the city.
Good intentions that miss the mark

09.31 NZASM: Singles Quarter Housing: Waterval-Boven, in good use as tourist accommodation and well kept but ‘Victorianised’ through the application of retro-filigree or broeklaze.

09.32 NZASM: Waterval-Boven dwelling (?) now converted for use as a pizza restaurant. Tourism, one of the mainstays of Waterval-Boven, has the potential to support heritage retention and re-use but can also alter or destroy. It is a strong force that requires careful guidance. In a free-flow environment the danger exists of either loving it to death, or development past the point of the maximum tolerance for change.
Epilogue

There is an urgent need to appropriate C19 Eclectic Wilhelmiens structures in service of the people of South Africa. The safeguarding of this inheritance can only be brought about through a growing public awareness that the heritage value, tangible and intangible, belongs to the citizens. This is legally provided for by our National Heritage Resources Act (25 of 1999) through its effective nationalisation of heritage values. This in turns requires heritage activism – not only aimed at restoration, renovation or at very least, *in situ* preservation, but focussing on engagement with communities associated with that heritage, both previous and current, education of past and present inhabitants and stakeholders, and an earnest exploration of significance to ensure a responsible and sustainable transformation.

09.33 DPW: Various buildings of the Staatsartillerie have been plastered due to rapidly weathering soft face brick façades, a common shortcoming in C19 Eclectic ZA Wilhelmiens structures. This act has radically altered the appearance of the buildings, removing the richness brought by colour, texture and the concatenation through the carefully articulated *speklaag* (streaky bacon) coursing. This has been common practice in the past – refer for instance to figure 09.17.