ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION
IN SOUTH AFRICA SINCE 1994: 100+ PROJECTS

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Heritage protection in South Africa underwent a paradigm shift with the enactment of the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25) in 1999 (NHRA). The preceding National Monuments Act (1969) aimed purely to conserve monuments; objects with overt cultural-historical value, be it by virtue of their appearance, age, rarity or association. This conservationist approach can best be seen as an attempt to counter the negative actions of external (environmental) forces such as the action of time and human endeavour. The NHRA framed a different approach: our patronage is a cultural resource with inherent value of which we are both beneficiaries and, importantly, stewards. These concepts have come to the heritage fraternity from the realm of nature conservation where, when dealing with protecting mortal individual living organisms, longer holistic perspective must be taken. Short term impacts have long term repercussions.

The NHRA set the conditions for assessing impact due to human actions similarly to its slightly older twin act, the 1998 National Environmental Management Act (NEMA). Section 38 of the NHRA calls for Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs) to be carried out to inform the statutory approvals process of pre-defined categories of development. The first known HIA carried out under the NHRA rightly deserves a place in an overview of conservation practices in South Africa. The authors were pioneers, acting in a vacuum, led only by their own experience and the requirements of the then new NHRA. Since then, a vast number of impact assessments have been undertaken in South Africa, national and international guidelines have been published, and Impact Assessments have become a common tool in the World Heritage arena.

The most important but time consuming aspect of the overall impact assessment process is defining the values inherent to and represented by a place, a cumbersome process of mining and extraction. The great merit of the Pilgrim's Rest HIA is that the authors dug deeper than the obvious "cute village and curio market", and discovered an unknown richness of values in the uniqueness of the industrial heritage of the site. The area had already been earmarked as a potential candidate for World Heritage listing. A result of the HIA was that the inclusion of the site on the South African Tentative List for World Heritage status in 2004 became more focussed, presenting its industrial past as potentially being of outstanding universal value. This HIA was part of a pro-active process, made possible by bureaucrats who had the foresight to commission the HIA as an informarit to the site selection process, and not as a retrospective assessment to ensure minimum statutory compliance as is so often the case. This allowed the authors to bring their full expertise to the table and explore the possibilities that a multi-disciplinary approach could bring to the new impact assessment process. The Pilgrim's Rest HIA includes an impressive visual assessment, an aspect that is often neglected in current HIAs. That the project was cancelled, and its recommendations not enacted, does not detract from the achievement of the study. The Pilgrim's Rest HIA would not only stand up to scrutiny, but can also contribute to standard-setting, an achievement for a pioneering work.

We have become acutely aware of the fragility of the finite natural environment; and that extinction is eternal. Society has not yet come to the same conclusion in thinking about our own environment — our cultural ecology (from Gr. oikos 'house' + 'logy' (logic)). In the sustainability debate, often framed along the categories of the "triple bottom line", culture and heritage are often positioned as part of social sustainability. The Pilgrim's Rest HIA, and the intention behind the need for HIAs to be included in our toolkit to curate our physical environment, resonates with recent calls to identify "culture" as a fourth and individual pillar of sustainability. The HIA process has a critical role to play in ensuring that the future we hope to create includes that which we value from our past.

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C
1 Blyde river valley
2 Blyde river
3 Belvedere power line, 1910/1
4 Ponieskrantz North Tramway, 1918
5 Alanglade estate
6 Jubilee power station
7 Old road to Vaalhoek, 1880's
   (7a = 1932/36/38 photographs
   7b = 1970 photographs)
8 Drift in Blyde river

D
9 Unspoilt banks of Blyde river
10 Rabbit and turkey farm
11 Round hut [farm?]  
12 Foot path from Alanglade/  
   Ponieskrantz North mine 
   to Graskop
13 Low water bridge at  
   Blyde river, ca 1980'
14 Approx 10 graves
15 View toward historical  
   landscape

B
1 Clewer tramway, 1897
2 Old road to Lydenburg, ca 1850
3 View towards historical landscape
4 Clewer Creek valley
5 Traditional settlement, possibly  
   one of Chief Kebeng's, <1900
6 Road to Duke's Hill mine
7 Clewer Creek
8 Clewer Creek location, <1938
9 Eucalyptus plantation, <1930
10 Plan for new location 1949 - un executed

A
1 Blyde river valley
2 Blyde river
3 Belvedere power line, 1910/1
4 Jucloe power line, 1895
5 Jubilee race, 1895
6 Jubilee hydro-electric power  
   station, 1895
7 Compound, <1949
8 Alanglade estate
9 Old road to Graskop, 1890
10 Traditional settlement, 1930's
11 Housing scheme, 1966
12 Historical footpaths
13 Informal houses, 1990's
14 Vegetable gardens
15 Eucalyptus plantation, <1930
16 White cemetery, 1926
17 Black cemetery, 1926
18 Prospecting remains
19 Severage works
20 Weir, 1895

Composite historical map
Integrating the new settlement with the heritage place