

Contemporary Architectural Practice in Africa: Mashabane Rose ASSOCIATES

by Martin Moeller

Even those Americans who follow the design world quite closely are likely to have little or no knowledge of contemporary architecture in Africa. While several recent projects on the continent have garnered international press coverage, these were primarily the work of non-African architects, as in the case of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Alexandria Library) in Egypt, by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta. Very few buildings designed by architects based in Africa are widely known outside of the countries in which they are located.

Nevertheless, there are a number of contemporary African firms—especially in the rapidly changing nation of South Africa—that are doing extraordinary work. Among these is the office of Mashabane Rose Associates (MRA) in Johannesburg. With a portfolio that includes several very high-profile projects, such as South Africa's first museum of Apartheid and an arts center at the University of Johannesburg, the firm already enjoys great prominence in its own country. MRA has also begun to make news overseas, having been a finalist in several major design competitions in Canada, Ireland,

and elsewhere. Actually, although they may not realize it, many Americans are at least indirectly familiar with one of MRA's projects, namely, the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, which opened to much media attention at the beginning of this year.

At first glance, much of MRA's work seems as though it would fit comfortably in Europe, Asia, or the Americas. A closer look, however, reveals that the firm's projects are quite strongly rooted in their physical and cultural contexts. To date, MRA has consistently produced buildings that have a universal, modern quality, and yet are distinctly African at the same time.

"Most of our work, fortunately or otherwise, cannot be divorced from the dictates of our African landscape," says Phill Mashabane, who, along with Jeremy Rose, is one of the firm's principals. "We derive inspiration and ideas from the landscape, incorporating client use expectations. We try to fuse all those interpretations—and timeless architectural details—into practical space."

The arts facility at the University of Johannesburg is a case in point. The project consists of two largely unadorned brick-and-concrete structures—one for performance and the other for visual arts—linked by a forecourt that serves as a gathering space for students and also buffers the facility from nearby sources of noise. The courtyard itself is unplanted except for a carpet of grass that is gently terraced, descending toward the entrances to the buildings. A long, low, rectangular fountain, in which water levels gradually rise and fall to suggest tidal motion, lines one side of the courtyard, while a curving wooden walkway and a somewhat enigmatic circular form incised into the lawn offset the linearity of the buildings. The result is a strikingly minimalist composition, of which the stark yet beautiful landscape is, surprisingly, the most assertive element.

While physical context is often a key determinant in MRA's design process, several of the firm's most important commissions have been defined primarily by their emotionally charged programs. One such project is the Hector Pieterse Memorial Museum in Soweto, named for a 12-year-old boy who was one of hundreds of young people shot and killed by police during a student uprising in 1976. A photograph of Pieterse's body being carried by another student was widely published around the world, and became a symbol of the Apartheid regime's brutality.

The exterior of the museum is rather modest, with simple walls made of brick—the material most commonly used in surrounding structures—and punctuated by what appear to be randomly placed windows. The interior provides a carefully choreographed experience, however, organized around a continuous ramp that leads the visitor through the events of the day on which Pieterse was killed. From inside, in fact, it becomes clear that the window pattern is not random at all. Rather, each window is carefully placed so that it frames a view relevant to the story. By applying explanatory text—captions, in effect—directly to the glass, the architects cleverly co-opted landmarks beyond the museum's walls and made them part of the exhibition. At the center of the building is a gravel-lined courtyard containing blocks of stone engraved with the names of all of the victims of the massacre.

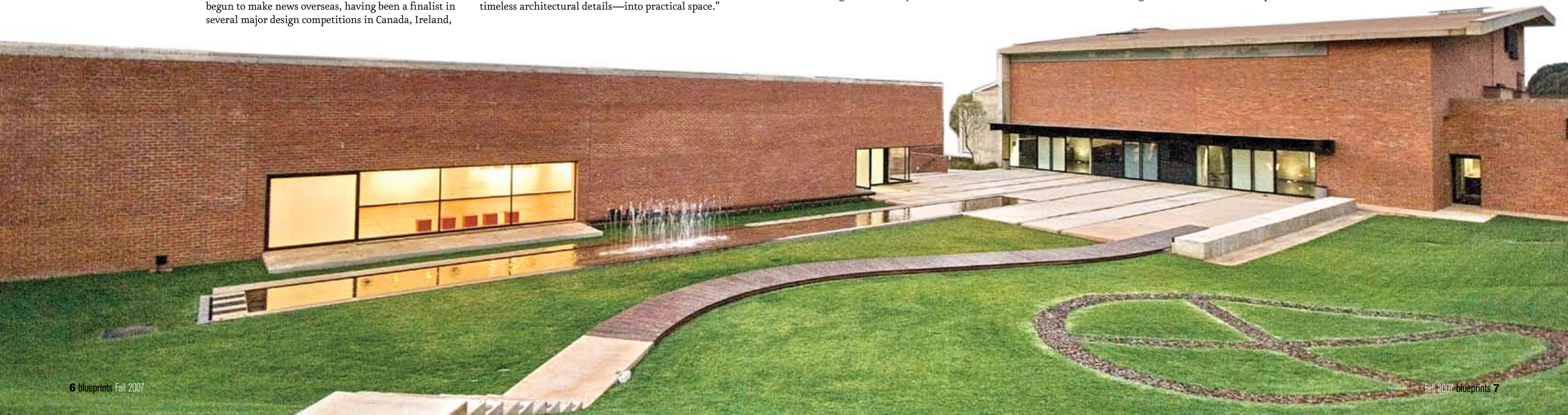
As in the Pieterse Memorial Museum, control of the visitor's path is a key element of MRA's design for the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. The entry sequence begins with an external ramp, which is lined on one side with a wall composed of loose stones bound together in metal mesh—the first of many instances throughout the museum in which cage-like elements serve as metaphors for political oppression. Life-sized images of people walking up the ramp provide a human context even if no one else is actually present. After reaching the roof, which affords expansive views of the



above left to right: Interior of the Apartheid Museum; Rear façade of Arts Center at the University of Johannesburg; Entry ramp to the Apartheid Museum with wall of loose stones in the metal "cages". All courtesy of Mashabane Rose Associates.

below: Entry courtyard of the University of Johannesburg Arts Center. Courtesy of Mashabane Rose Associates.

next page: Entry stairs at the Apartheid Museum. Courtesy of Mashabane Rose Associates.





surrounding landscape, visitors descend into the “belly” of the museum and its subject matter. Before they do so, however, they are forced into two separate paths—one for whites and one for non-whites—providing a visceral reminder of the absolute segregation that was the law of the land less than two decades ago.

While any architect might feel daunted by the challenge of designing a building to commemorate such a difficult period in his country’s history, Mashabane seems to have pursued the project with resolve, and ultimately even found the experience somewhat cathartic. “We responded to the dictates of the time in accommodating the painful record of the segregation program that was perpetuated by the Apartheid policy,” he said. “The memory had to be rekindled and preserved. The challenge of the project was to also house the intangible—the memory—with resonating voices from the past. On a personal level, it served as a relief of internal pressures.”

It is difficult for a foreigner to comprehend the pace and degree of change in South Africa over the past couple of decades, during which one of the most repressive regimes on Earth gave way to a modern democracy without civil war. While the country still faces enormous challenges, from persistent poverty and crime to rampant HIV/AIDS infection rates, it also boasts a growing economy and continuing social progress.

In many ways, the office of Mashabane Rose Associates is emblematic of the new South Africa. The staff, who are all pictured on the firm’s website, represent a remarkable cross-section of ethnicities and professional backgrounds. According to Mashabane, such diversity directly contributes to the quality of the firm’s work.

“I personally have a diverse background,” says Mashabane. “I appreciate different value systems that inform thought and application. I look at the value input rather than the person. Architecture is an art that can only be derived from different value systems, [moving] towards collective responsibility.” •

In Africa:

Architectural Achievement Beyond the Pyramids

by Nadja Popovich, Museum Intern

Africa has long held some of the most striking yet overlooked wonders of the world. Even as some expressions of African cultures, such as sculpture and textile arts, have found their way into the mainstream Western canon, African architecture in general remains conspicuously absent. We may all have grown up learning about such marvels of architectural engineering as the Great Pyramids, and the many accomplishments of the ancient society that managed to build such colossally perfect structures, but what else? How much more can we claim to know about ancient, and especially indigenous, African accomplishments in architecture and construction?

I lived in Zimbabwe and then Botswana as a little girl, and as I got word of the National Building Museum’s incoming exhibition *Lasting Foundations: The Art of Architecture in Africa*, it immediately brought back memories of my childhood. In particular, it reminded me of an extraordinary but not-so-well-known place I was lucky enough to visit: Great Zimbabwe, a historic site comprising the remnants of an ancient city that was once the center of an extensive empire. I can remember at the age of six climbing the ruins, and enjoying stunning vistas off the top of the massive walls known as the Great Enclosure. Even so, although I was (obviously) a stunningly architecturally aware six-year-old, what did I really know about any of it? I was too young to appreciate the fact that the ruins I was so light-heartedly scaling constitute a monument whose scope and quality are quite unparalleled in the sub-Saharan world.

Great Zimbabwe is, in fact, the largest ancient stone construction in Africa south of the Sahara, covering almost 1,800 acres. The massive walls were built using a dry-stone method (involving no mortar) that reflects a sophisticated mastery of masonry technique. The walls, five meters thick at their greatest point, are elegantly tapered, becoming narrower as they rise. Perhaps what is most impressive, however, is that the huge granite structures making up Great Zimbabwe (from which the modern country takes its name) have held up for over seven centuries.

The medieval Great Zimbabwe was a powerful city-state, resting at the center of a complex trading network. Yet, for reasons still unknown, after two centuries of unsurpassed power, the state went into decline and eventually disappeared. By the time of the first European colonization of the southeast African coast, the rumors of a monumental inland city had drawn much attention, but the colonists, blinded by racist preconceptions about “savage” African culture, refused to acknowledge Great Zimbabwe’s indigenous origins. They came up with various farfetched scenarios—from the fabled palaces of the Queen of Sheba, to the craftsmanship of other “white” ancient peoples, such as the Phoenicians—despite clear archaeological evidence to the contrary. The Europeans’ quest to disprove the idea of an indigenous origin for the city, in fact, became pervasive by the late 1800s. At one point, a team sanctioned by Cecil Rhodes himself and headed by an antiquarian removed what they deemed to be the sully effects of the natives in attempts to uncover the “true” origins of Great Zimbabwe. In the process, layers upon layers of archaeological deposits were lost.

Finally, in the early 20th century, legitimate excavations took place and Great Zimbabwe was ultimately declared to be unquestionably African in origin. The ruins conveyed the tale of a great culture that had, centuries before the arrival of Europeans, engaged in extensive trade with lands as far off as Asia, and had a large influence over much of southeastern Africa. Yet racially motivated political agendas still obscured the site’s significance. The white minority government of the country, then called Rhodesia, suppressed the facts pointing to an indigenous, black origin of the ancient city-state. The regime even went so far as to hire “scholars” to forge history, denying the greatness of any indigenous civilizations. Only once the modern nation of Zimbabwe gained its independence were the shrouds of racial prejudice finally lifted, and the true Great Zimbabwe revealed.

As a small child in the early 1990s exploring the ruins of the Great Zimbabwe, I was not aware of any of this. I was merely awed by the simple beauty of the stone enclosures and towers—an impression that stuck with me. Looking back, I believe that part of the allure of the place is its oneness with nature.



Despite its fortress-like construction, Great Zimbabwe does not stand at odds with the surrounding landscape—rather, the walls intertwine with natural formations and boulders.

These same walls had once enclosed a city made up of traditional *daga* (mud and thatch) huts, which have long since eroded away, but may have sheltered more than 18,000 inhabitants at the society’s peak. The civilization went into decline by the 15th century for unknown reasons. Theories on the causes have ranged from environmental degradation, resulting in an inability to sustain the large population, to changes in trade networking.

Whatever happened to the culture that created Great Zimbabwe, its ruins still inspire amazement for many reasons: the views, the impressive feats of construction, and the mystery surrounding the fate of its builders. But for all of the majesty and beauty, it is still scarcely known outside of the immediate region. The remarkable complex of Great Zimbabwe stands as a powerful reminder that some of the most fascinating works of architecture on Earth may be lurking in unexpected places, ready to be rediscovered. •



above left: **The Great Zimbabwe, January 1992.** Here, the author and her family stand in front of great conical towers. Built without mortar, these large structures are dispersed throughout the Great Zimbabwe site. Courtesy of Nadja Popovich.

above: **The Great Zimbabwe, January 1992.** The large boulders unite the structure with the surrounding landscape. Courtesy of Nadja Popovich.