

**Minister of Public Works
Mr J Radebe
22 October 1998**

[Back](#)

Towards an Architecture of Conscience: Architecture and Urbanism for the new Millennium

Closing Address at the ArchAfrica International Conference International Convention Centre, Durban, 18-22 October 1998

Your Excellency, the Ambassador of Egypt,
President of the AUA, Architect Ovo Charles Majoroh,
President of SAIA, Mr Brian Prycegrove,
President-elect of SAIA, Professor Vivienne Japha,
Distinguished Guests and Delegates from Africa and abroad,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to make a few closing remarks at the end of your significant deliberations here in this venue: the International Convention Centre, one of Durban's newest and more remarkable "architectural kids on the block". Judging from your programme and reports I have received, you have all managed to get through a particularly varied and integrated list of activities. Durban is my hometown, and I am pleased indeed that you have been able to see at first hand through the various tours of the city and its environs many aspects of its history, diverse culture, styles and architectures. I was born in Cato Manor, forcibly removed with my family to the then-new township of KwaMashu before leaving the country to work for liberation with the ANC. I returned to a much-changed city on my release from gaol in 1990. I trust that your stay in the city has been both pleasant and interesting, and I take pleasure in extending to you all an open invitation to return whenever you can.

South Africa is honoured to have been the hosts of the 5th Triennial Congress of the African Union of Architects. It is especially significant for us that you have gathered here as we are in the process of transforming our political system and reconstructing the socio-economic environment in which our people live and work. That process involves a very real, and at times painful, exercise of bringing together people and organisations that previously were at violent odds with one another. The new South Africa attempts to allow each of our diverse religious, language, ethnic and cultural sectors to participate in an honest and enduring search for our roots in a common African soil. In government, and I might add, a very large portion of our society generally, we have built a consensus that instead of being a recipe for division, our multi-faceted diversity is a rich and wonderful treasure.

Part of that diversity is reflected in the architecture of our built environment, and part of that, you have seen in Durban itself. At once confusing and overpowering, the different lines, spaces, contexts and arrangements are quite extraordinary. But like many states around the world, we have had to face the challenge of how to preserve traditions, resurrect and invigorate neglected and perhaps more appropriate forms, how to conjure up new images of our society. Scarce financial resources concentrate government's mind certainly, as they do other sectors as well. The array of institutions, professions, laws, regulations, by-laws and municipal ordinances are enough to terrify the unwary. Our own experience of some of the ill-conceived ideas and a lack of concern for environmental and other issues from the past have warned us about the limits we need to consider when we engage in new urban and rural planning.

The Conference has been an international one, and I am sure that you have shared many examples of how individual countries or regions have come to tackle the very many common problems that confront those of us who are engaged in the built environment. In South Africa we have chosen to radically revise the system of statutory regulation for the major built environment professions. We have moved from the premise that professional expertise in our country – and its depth and degree of experience is vast and something we are particularly proud of – is a national asset and should be managed as a scarce resource of high value. The expertise is renewable but we are also aware that it can be degraded if standards are allowed to decline, if a qualitative interest in the professions is not promoted, and indeed if that expertise remains closeted and out of reach of the needs of the majority of our people. We accept that ultimately the intrinsic value of the professions lies in their essential role and function in socio-economic development. Government in South Africa has committed itself to prioritising socio-economic development in a democratic context, whilst at the same time ensuring that professional expertise is nurtured, maintained and extended to all communities.

It is the task of the professions to establish mechanisms to control the standards of education and training, of

professional work, and the professional behaviour of their members. It is the task of government, after consultation with all role players, to establish the mechanisms to regulate the relationship between the professions and the public, and to protect the public against the incompetent and unscrupulous. To allow the latter to run free not only runs the risk of demeaning the professions themselves, but also opens the public to physical danger and discomfort. I shall be releasing a White Paper shortly that outlines in much more detail the policy proposals we have concerning the establishment of a Built Environment Statutory Council, as well as changes to the shape and tasks of the various Councils that regulate the architects, landscape architects, engineering, quantity surveyors and valuers professions. We understand that in many ways the changes we propose represent a world first, and I would especially welcome comment from the international representatives here once the proposals are made public. My office will make the necessary arrangements, and of course the White Paper will be available on the internet.

Essentially what we are looking for is a system that lets us implement the changes that are taking place within the professions in South Africa. For us, it is important that the needs of communities can merge with the soul of our country in a manner that can find physical expression through the built environment and landscapes that we establish. The African-American architect, Paul Taylor, has written that architecture "provides an intimate immersion experience through which historical and cultural knowledge can be instilled. Architecture surrounds us on a daily basis. It is a permanent presence – a constant of monumental dimensions." He goes on: "Architecture celebrates cultures we value and cherish. Preserve the architecture and you preserve the culture that created it because architecture is symbolic and ideological as well as functional. To be surrounded by the symbols and images of one's heritage is to be affirmed and empowered."

It is in this context that the real import of your conference deliberations and the work of the African Union of Architects, the constituent bodies in each of our countries, and the smaller number of organisations and associations in other parts of the world that are dedicated to the study and promotion of African Architectures, becomes evident. Susan Denyer has reminded all of us that:

The wealth and beauty of African architecture have for too long been sadly neglected and misunderstood. Despite its relatively low population density, much of the continent has a greater architectural complexity than any other continent. Over 1500 peoples live in Africa and it can be broadly stated that each of these has a unique material culture, not in every detail but certainly in aggregate.

Anyone who has travelled in Africa will understand precisely. Many of us in the ANC, for example, were deployed in exile in many different parts of the world. For those of us who spent a great deal of time in African countries we were privileged to witness and experience the greatness of our continent. Although much of the time our minds were not on the architecture of the towns, cities or rural areas we happened to be, since 1994 and the advent of our democracy we have been better placed to appreciate these experiences. Some examples of our continent's diverse architectural forms will suffice. The spectacular symbolism and functionality of the Dogon settlements along the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali; the church complex of Lalibela in Ethiopia; the densely populated villages of the Yoruba people; the beehive style of the Zulu hut complexes; the striking lines of the towns along the Swahili coast of eastern Africa; the corbelled houses of the Afrikaner Trekboers in the Karoo; the bustling modern cities of Africa like Cairo, Nairobi, Lagos, Harare, stand alongside older cities like Mogadishu, Fez, Beira or Monrovia.

What strikes one about all of these is the way in which histories have intermingled and merged, and have in the process produced particular styles. However, it is also easy to see the dominant and in many instances the dominating nature of colonial influences of one sort or another.

It is therefore more than appropriate that in this period where so much is said about an emerging African Renaissance that we turn our attention to the real meaning and power of African architectures. Alongside functionality came symbolism; religious belief and political power often shaped the arrangement of buildings and abodes. Architecture, says Denyer, "became a group solution to habitation problems, communally worked out and reaffirmed by each generation." There is a deep appreciation of environmental factors in all vernacular architecture: a concern for the type of building material; the physical location of structures in relation to the source of people's livelihood and their ancestry. The structures and their relationship with one another and to the political realities of power and socio-economic status acknowledged space, light, movement and a harmony with spiritual and other values.

The soul of Africa needs to return to our architectural drawing tables. In many instances it has returned. And here I would just like to say how pleased I am that part of the public exhibition during the course of your conference has been the reworked design and model for our own new Constitutional Court building, destined for the site of the Old Fort gaol in Johannesburg. When we awarded the brief, one of the points made by the

assessors was that the approach the designers brought to the project was "more likely to succeed in revealing African trends than a self-conscious application of traditional stylistic elements or borrowing from European or historical building precedents." That is what we in government wish to see more of in the planning and design of built environments: the ability for African trends to reveal themselves, for Africanness to find expression in the physical environment around us. This is not the route of the copycat; it is the route of the artist, of the African that beats within us all. It requires the ability to adapt for modern uses.

Collectively it is our task to find the ways to achieve these ambitious plans within the limits of our resources and to ensure effective maintenance and running costs and to secure environmental control.

As Public Works Minister, and as a representative of government, I can assure you of our whole-hearted principled support for the establishment of a Built Environment Network for Africa where you can pursue the challenges that confront us in this area, making sure that the concept goes beyond the realm of academia to include the widest range of participants as possible. Such a centre can only really succeed if it contains a practical element to it. We need to identify and implement appropriate technologies, expression and building materials for African conditions. This must remain a priority of all our collective efforts.

On the occasion of the award for the design of the new Constitutional Court I indicated that we were investigating the introduction of a Presidential Award for Architectural Excellence in South Africa. This would be one way to enhance the reputation of and promote the profession in South Africa as a whole. Through the proposals for a new regulatory framework for the professions, we hope to provide a mechanism through which the professions can pursue their tasks with the necessary support from government they require. We will provide the interface between public and private. My Department will support and indeed promote initiatives to develop sustainable bursary funds and other support for potential students to build and develop our professions. We have to develop innovative mentoring schemes and vacation working schedules for students and others who are interested. More important, professions and government can work together to make the public out there more aware of the critical role you play in the general development of our societies. I would like to believe that in our South African experience, drawn as it is from our situation and the knowledge we have had of other countries too, we have something that others could also learn from. My door is always open to suggestions and proposals that may emanate from your associations and organisations for the promotion of the profession in SA, and of course, elsewhere.

In conclusion, I want once again to thank you for coming to Durban for your work. We all look forward to the implementation and further development of the ideas that have come out of your discussions. As Africans we must link up with other institutions elsewhere that wish to work in partnership with us; who celebrate our heritage and promote its advance. The African Diaspora is large and incredibly talented in all manner of ways. We must tap into that so that everywhere, wherever we are, we can have a sense of being at home, of being African.

I commend the organisers and the large number of people who have managed to take the concept of the new role of architecture into the streets and communities of Durban. I commend also the sponsors whose commitment to the tasks ahead is exemplified in their generosity to make this conference and congress a success.

I thank you.

[top](#)