

DIFFERENT FAÇADES OF THE MODERN HOUSE
AND ITS OPENNESS TOWARD THE LANDSCAPE
IN A POST-COLONIAL CITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

RÓŻNE OBLICZA WSPÓŁCZESNEGO DOMU
I JEGO OTWARCIA NA KRAJOBRAZ
W POSTKOLONIALNYM MIEŚCIE
W POŁUDNIOWEJ AFRYCE

Abstract

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the problem of contextual architectural design of a house in a multicultural society in a postcolonial city in Southern Africa, and the need to search for a way of integrating its inhabitants within its structure. This problem is illustrated in the example of modern single-family houses located in Windhoek in Namibia, in neighbourhoods with different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. With the analysis carried out in the context of field research, it shows that an immense knowledge of the context – its culture, history and society – can reveal information that is relevant and inspiring in the process of shaping the house and the degree of its openness toward the environment in a multicultural society.

Keywords: house, multicultural society, African postcolonial city

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na problem kontekstualnego projektowania architektonicznego domu w wielokulturowym społeczeństwie w postkolonialnym mieście w południowej Afryce oraz na konieczność poszukiwania sposobu na integrację mieszkańców w ramach struktur wielokulturowego miasta. Problem ten przedstawiono na przykładzie współczesnych domów w Windhoek w Namibii, zlokalizowanych w dzielnicach o różnym statusie

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społeczno-kulturowo-gospodarczym. Z analizy, przeprowadzonej m.in. w ramach badań terenowych, wynika, że głębsze poznanie kontekstu, szczególnie kultury, historii i tradycji danego miejsca, może odsłonić istotne i inspirujące informacje o procesie kształtowania domu i stopnia jego otwarcia na otoczenie w wielokulturowym społeczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, wielokulturowe społeczeństwo, afrykańskie miasto postkolonialne

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, in the year 2050, two thirds of the world's population will live in cities – “much of this urbanization will unfold in Africa and Asia, bringing huge social, economic and environmental transformations (...). The world can expect to add close to 1.5 billion urbanites in the next 15 years, and 3 billion by 2050”¹. Africa greatly contributes to the statistics and African cities are becoming home for an increasing number of people. Although the cities are quite different from one another, they share the main struggles. Overcoming the colonial inheritance of poverty, underdevelopment and socio-spatial inequality, forging non-violent environments, coping with informal settlements and globalization², as well as the phenomenon of “ghost cities” are just a few unsolved problems in the growing cities of Southern Africa. There are also issues such as the urban sprawl along the roads, the lack of pedestrian and public transport, “place-making”, the density of the urban fabric followed by the simultaneous removal of public spaces, urban greenery, natural landscapes, and the tendency to overlook the local context and paradigms of sustainable development³. These problems are reflected in the modern structure of growing postcolonial African cities, especially post apartheid. Countries such as the Republic of South Africa and Namibia were greatly influenced by apartheid – a political system based on the theory proclaiming the need for separate development of different races, which was in force from the 1940s to the mid-nineties⁴. During the apartheid era, entire population groups were relocated 5–15 kilometres away from the city centre by the minority exercising power in order to create an essentially dual society⁵. “Namibian and South African cities were divided into “modern” white areas with an essentially western life style, and “underdeveloped” black areas aiming to mitigate the “detrimentalizing” nature of the urban environment. The apartheid cities were understood as a white domain. Black people were tolerated in the city

¹ United Nations Population Fund, Urbanization, <http://www.unfpa.org/urbanization>, accessed: 10.09.2015.

² M. J. Holm, M. M. Kallehauge, *Africa – Architecture, Culture, Identity*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and contributors, Rosendahls, Esbjerg 2015, p. 15.

³ S. Umenne, A. Rykowska-Sachse, *Context and the Emergent Architecture of Towns in Namibia*, SABS International Conference 2013-Promoting Sustainable Built Environment: Architecture, Environment, Technology & Society In The Global South, Nairobi, Kenya (10–12 October 2013), p. 1.

⁴ V. Tonchi, W. Lindeke, J. Grotper, *Historical Dictionary of Namibia*, Scarecrow Press, 2012.

⁵ F. Müller-Friedman, *Toward a (post) apartheid architecture? A view from Namibia*, Planning Perspectives, Vol. 23, Routledge 2008, p. 31.

only to sell their cheap labour. The spatial separation between race groups was the physical expression of the social, economic and political division within Namibian and South African society (...)"⁶. Unfortunately, the effects of this system are still visible in the form of physical, social and cultural division in modern cities, which is encapsulated by the following words of a resident of Windhoek: "This artificially produced division between people of different races, of different tribes with different cultures will always remain in our minds"⁷. The past influenced, among others, the life of urbanites, the form of urban built environment (roads, squares, streets, facades, etc.) and houses (location, the type of a fence and its architecture). At present, it results in the different appearances of modern residential buildings in the Southern African cities. It is manifested, among others, through the different location of the houses, their facades and the degree of opening towards surroundings such as streets, neighbouring properties, gardens, and natural landscape. The houses arise both in the urban tissue of the area inhabited by the white population, as well as in the *township* – unplanned areas inhabited by an ethnically diverse residents living without basic facilities and which were created in the apartheid era. At the same time, today's "African cities are increasingly becoming the scene of co-existence – and the biggest challenge"⁸ and thus the home for new architectural projects that attempt to reach a compromise on the issue of opening them to the multi-cultural and natural environment.

2. WINDHOEK AS AN EXAMPLE OF A POSTCOLONIAL AND POST-APARTHEID CITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Namibia is one of the African countries whose cities are becoming home to a growing population. The population is estimated at 2.5 million, with a growth rate of 2.6% over the last 17 years while the population density is among the lowest in the world⁹. Namibia is mostly covered by deserts and semi-deserts with limited water resources and arid soil, which constitutes the backdrop for the expanding urban space. The population growth rate in cities is much higher than in rural areas. The most important city of Namibia is Windhoek – the capital of the country, inhabited by 280 thousand people. On the one hand, it offers a continental atmosphere due to the built environment and historical buildings dating back to the German colonial rule, cuisine, culture, dress code and educational institutions, but on the other hand the colour, sounds and pace of life of a contemporary African city¹⁰. Windhoek is also a typical example of a post-colonial and post-apartheid city, which is reflected in its modern housing development. Windhoek is inhabited by a number of different racial groups: 72% of the city's ethnically differentiated population still resides in or around the former townships whereas and 18% of the city's white population lives exclusively within the city's former white areas¹¹. "In Windhoek, the vast majority of the poor live in the north-western townships: Otjomuise, Khomasdal, Goreangab, Wanaheda, Hakahana, Katatura Central, Okuryangava – where social conditions are poor, and

⁶ F. Müller-Friedman, *Beyond the Post-Apartheid City: De/Segregation and Sub urbanization in Windhoek, Namibia*, African Geographical Review, Vol. 25, 2006, p. 34.

⁷ Author's interview (Anna Rynkowska-Sachse), Windhoek 2013.

⁸ Holm M. J., Kallehauge M. M, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁹ R. Schalkwyk, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹¹ F. Müller-Friedman, *Beyond...*, *op.cit.*, p. 45.



- III. 1. Map of Windhoek divided into districts, Source: Mueller-F Friedman (2006)
- III. 2. Klein Windhoek – a district inhabited by the white population, Source: author, (2013)

where the part of the community is deprived of any economic opportunities. The contrast with Eros Park, Klein Windhoek, Ludwigsdorf, Auasblick, Olympia, Kleine Kuppe and other suburbs is all too obvious ...”¹² (ill. 1). These districts are located in the historic centre of the city and its vicinity, and are inhabited by the white, often wealthier part of the community. The way the buildings are presented proves that they have to solve the problem of integration of a multicultural society, too. Du Pisani “draws” the picture of Namibian towns with a history similar to that of Windhoek: “While the official discourse seeks the transformation of our towns and cities into more equitable and socially integrated spaces, the reality is different. Our towns and cities, in common with towns and cities elsewhere, become more fragmented and unequal. Economic apartheid has replaced racial apartheid”¹³. Therefore, the physical, social, and cultural divisions, typical of the post-colonial and post-apartheid city, have been captured by the development of single-family houses different for each district, and by the lack of a comprehensive and holistic urban development plan aiming at the integration of all its inhabitants. Until recently, the local development plan has focused mainly on the road infrastructure, subdivision into land use zones disregarding the issue of the isolation of individual districts or the revitalization of the multicultural centre. In the case of large scale developments, the municipality reserves the right to decide about public parks, open spaces, and recreational facilities. Unfortunately, in the case of small scale developments such as single-family houses, there are no specific municipality development guidelines to architects other than those included in the city development plan and construction law. *The Digest of Namibian Architecture 2001*, a journal sponsored by the *Namibian Institute of Architects*, gives guidelines on how to design single-family houses located in wealthy neighbourhoods. It emphasizes the importance of blending the designs into nature, of making the natural environment the focal point of building designs, and of experimenting with natural building materials. The publication also describes how to incorporate the natural environment into designs: blending buildings into the natural surroundings, so that they can hardly be seen, situating buildings in such a way that the users may enjoy an unspoilt view of the landscape, and designing climatically appropriate buildings¹⁴. Indeed, in the low-density housing districts inhabited mostly by the white population, most of the plots are either fenced or walled, separated as much as possible from the neighbours due to a rising crime rate¹⁵. At the same time the very houses are open to the natural environment. In these mono-functional areas the prevalence of the automobile as the means of transportation leaves little opportunity for casual encounters (ill.2). The situation is different with regard to the townships in the poor neighbourhoods inhabited by an ethnically diverse population. The informal neighbourhoods which are characterized by a high population density and which have not been planned by a city architect or adopted by a city council have been built by the users themselves using materials such as corrugated metal sheets. The individual plots are not isolated from each other. They intermingle. They are not fenced but open to the environment – streets, adjacent land, and the landscape. Cultivated gardens, where the food comes from, and the hearth in front of the house, walking and everyday neighbourhood exchanges and cooperation have become a natural backdrop for the lives of these areas (ill. 3). One might think that the fragmentation

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ F. Müller-Friedman, *Toward...*, *op.cit.*, p. 38–39.

¹⁵ F. Lühl, *The production of inequality: from colonial planning to neoliberal urbanization in Windhoek*, *Digest of Namibian Architecture*, Picasso Headline (Pty) Ltd., Cape Town 2012, p. 27.



III. 3. Fig. 3. Katutura – *township* inhabited by different racial groups, Source: Sachse J. (2013)

III. 4. The Munting Residence, Klein Windhoek, source: author (2013)

III. 5. “Coca – cola” house – a house in Katutura, source: author (2013)

of the urban tissue would be increasingly deepening. However, recently, the Windhoek development plans with regard to its inhabitants' integration and their equal treatment regardless of their social and economic status have changed as far as the city's spatial policy is concerned. In 2011, Barnard Mutua Architects offered Windhoek an alternative development plan called the "Windhoek River Walk"¹⁶, in which the vehicular traffic is substituted by pavements both parallel and vertical to the river flowing through the historic districts of the town, the townships and neighbouring districts. The spatial integration of the culturally differentiated districts that, so far, have been racially segregated has turned out to be the main benefit of the plan¹⁷. Thus, the inhabitants from different districts, while preserving the individual facades of their houses, can open to the multi-cultural image of the city and by using the pedestrian pathways can enjoy nature, which, in turn, makes cultural and social integration possible." The integration of groups that used to be socially marginalized cannot be realized by forcing them to adapt to the urban environment conditions defined by the white inhabitants, but should be implemented by creating equal access to the public space for everyone"¹⁸, and this is what is offered by the "Windhoek River Walk".

3. DIFFERENT HOUSE FACADES IN WINDHOEK – A CASE STUDY

The different facades of contemporary houses in the city's multi-cultural context and the degree of their openness to the landscape are demonstrated by the houses from two different town districts: Klein Windhoek – the old and colonial town district where the houses are fenced from the street side but open to the gardens and the surrounding semi-desert landscape; and Katutura – a township located far from the historic centre and inhabited by black residents.

3.1. The house in Klein Windhoek

Klein Windhoek is the oldest district in the town, founded in 1840. The missionaries who arrived here turned it into orchards and vineyards in 1899. The district is inhabited by whites and the prices of land plots are the highest in Namibia. The area of Klein Windhoek is mountainous and drops towards the river valley. The Munting Residence (il. 4) is located on a rocky, scarcely overgrown slope on Uhland Street. The owners of the house – architects Paul and Karen Munting – in line with the latest trends, made the natural environment of the house the essential part of their design. The building is located parallel to the street along the north-south axis with its rear part facing the street and its front part open to the picturesque valley. A very high wall was built from the side of the street and a steel fence was constructed along the access road to minimize the noise generated by the hectic street and to ensure the safety of the residents. The architects used plants typical of the local eco-system and rocks and stones found nearby to cover

¹⁶ Designed by the ARG with the support of the local authorities and accepted to be implemented in May, 2013.

¹⁷ S. Umenne, A. Rykowska-Sachse, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁸ F. Müller-Friedman, *Beyond...*, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

the area – in this way the damage caused during the construction of the foundations has been compensated for. The architects, aware of the effects of exposure to the sun, created a computer simulation of this phenomenon under summer and winter conditions during the pre-design analysis phase. Therefore, it was much easier for them to take decisions regarding the design. The majority of the windows were designed in the facade from the side of the garden so that it would be possible to admire the surrounding landscape. While the rooms requiring daylight were located in the north-west part of the house from the garden side with a view of the valley, the remainder were located in the south-west part from the side of the street. The roof angle was adjusted to minimize the artificial cooling and heating. The Muntings' house was harmoniously integrated into the natural surroundings. This was possible not only thanks choosing the right location, composition and architectural solutions, but also selecting the local elements (rocks, plants, texture). The house was located in such a way so that the residents might enjoy a beautiful view which reflects the local climate, and which is not only invisible but also separated from the neighbouring plots and the street.

3.2. The “Coca cola” house – Katutura township

Katutura is a growing suburb 10 km north of the Central Business District in Windhoek. It is a township created in the 1950s during apartheid, when Namibia was under the political influence of the Republic of South Africa. Nowadays in Katutura live native people coming from different tribes (Owambo, Herero, Damara and so on), having different religious beliefs (among others Lutherans, Catholics) and of a different social status. The residents of Katutura appreciate the social contacts that help them survive in the urban environment. The urban life is associated, to a great extent, with the street space and is characterized by liveliness, community spirit, the feeling of unity and social and economic variety. The “Coca cola” house next to the Sam Nujoma stadium, which is the result of the work of a resident who is also a designer, constitutes a good example (fig. 5). The building consists of two parts separated by a low, openwork gate that leads to the courtyard: the shop part was designed by the owner himself in 2005, and the residential part is a typical house built for the blacks who were moved from the city centre in the fifties. Both parts are parallel to the street and moved 2 metres away from it creating a space of “pseudo-pavement” covered with yellow sand which also covers the back yard. Every day and during sports events, in the shop on the ground floor one can buy coca cola and other cold drinks while admiring a beautiful view over the surroundings from the terrace on the first floor. The great number of customers suggests that the owner has managed to create a friendly place. Just like the surrounding houses the shop is built from materials such as rusted corrugated metal sheets, metal sheet bits and pieces, and steel elements making it blend into the context. The building form is contemporary and open to the street through a huge door. Its overhanging roof makes the building shaded from each side. The residential part in the form of a one-storey cuboid covered with a low-pitch gable roof is accessible from the courtyard through the low, openwork gate. The facade is constituted by two windows which open outside. Actually, there is no wall; it is replaced by the openwork bars located inside the building and which cannot be seen at first glance. The nearby trees were not planted but they are coincidental seedlings that managed to survive.

4. CONCLUSIONS

These examples show two different facades of modern single-family houses in a post-colonial African city, where openness to the environment or landscape could be interpreted in a different way. The events of the past, which made the physical, social and cultural partition within the community, have been reflected in the structure of the buildings. Unfortunately, it lasts to this day and is manifested, among others, by different types of facades and the degree of openness towards both the urban structure and the natural environment. The organizers of the exhibition *Africa – Architecture, Culture, Identity* suggest a solution: “coexistence is crucial to the way one builds and dwells across the African continent, typified as it is by great internal differences and paradoxes, even within individual countries”¹⁹. In the case of a multicultural society living in the post-colonial African cities, “the openness is not about creating homogeneous sense of unity, but about permitting interactions in a fragile social environment without getting in one another’s way. A strong will to reconcile the irreconcilable”²⁰. According to Albert Speer & Partner today “cities are not able to fulfil their functions unless we can support them in maintaining the social balance in them and among them by respecting their cultural diversity and establishing high quality in terms of design, architecture and the environment”²¹, and ensuring equal access to the public space, which becomes relevant in the face of changing Europe²².

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¹⁹ M. J. Holm, M. M. Kallehauge, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Albert Speer & Partner, *A Manifesto for sustainable Cities. Think local, act global*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, Berlin, London 2009.

²² Up to year 2060, Europe will be inhabited by population of different cultures – Africans, Asians, Arabs (Holm M. J., Kallehauge M. M., *op.cit.*, p. 129)