

**SYMMETRY, POWER AND ARCHITECTURE: THE SOCIAL MEANINGS OF SYMMETRY
AND ASYMMETRY IN THE COLONIAL EDWARDIAN ARCHITECTURE OF THE
HOUSE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Gavin McLachlan

Department of Architecture

University of Port Elizabeth

P O Box 1600

Port Elizabeth

6001

South Africa

This paper is concerned with the issue of motive in the widespread use of an Arts and Crafts approach and imagery in Edwardian and Post-Edwardian Colonial residential architecture in Southern Africa. It is especially concerned with the architectural and social implications of the use of symmetry or asymmetry in the composition of the facadal and plan architecture of the houses of the time. The issue of motive, it will be argued, can to a certain extent be substituted for the notion of social meaning within the context of the society of the time. In order to deal with this issue it is necessary to describe in outline the development of an Arts and Crafts Movement as an architectural influence in the Southern Africa of the turn of the century, and to describe something of the architecture of the houses of the time.

In the Southern African context the Arts and Crafts Movement describes a creative movement imported from England initially in the model of a high architecture. Subsequently, especially by means of the prominent architecture of Herbert Baker and others it flourished in the image of the house as a dominant symbol of power. In developing this symbol Baker lent credence to a dualistic image in the form of the imported English Vernacular style and the local Cape Dutch Revival style. The gothic English Vernacular style is inherently asymmetrical in both facade and plan development, and was the chosen style for the private home; while the neo-classical Cape Dutch Revival style was symmetrical in facadal development (if not in plan) and was the chosen style for houses which were principally sites of societal, economic and political power. In this case the issues of style, form, power and symmetry are inextricably interlinked, and present a compelling scenario of the development of the residential architecture of the ruling elite. This development exploited a particular social meaning of symmetry and asymmetry as a part of a larger package of design concerns, in its attempt to create icons of power and security.

In addition to high and relatively high architectural statements of the house, there was a transfer of these ideas to the realm of the vernacular suburban house, often built on a speculative basis. The complimentary stylistic types of the English Vernacular and the Cape Dutch Revival with their opposing geometries of asymmetry and symmetry may possibly assume a more ambiguous and complex social meaning here. The broader spread of the societal notions of an emerging urban economy and the concepts of fashion and

acceptance may play a role in their development. In the interplay of styles in the vernacular version of the Edwardian Colonial house asymmetry and symmetry were used as compositional elements in an attempt to create an acceptable image rather than to create a convincing architecture of power or privacy.

The importance of the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry both in the creation and interpretation of this architecture needs to be evaluated. The extent to which these concepts were generating architectural concerns appears to have been of lesser importance than their use as secondary organising principles. Predominant concerns such as the use of traditional materials and craftsmanship, the response to site, and the comprehensiveness of the image of the building appear to have been primary design concerns. Symmetry and asymmetry were the servants rather than the masters of these concerns.

The essentially Colonial nature of these architectural statements needs to be seen in context. Southern African society of the time was entirely dominated in a colonial manner by Europeans and many of the largest economic undertakings were of an exploitive nature.

Diamond and gold mining were the principle examples of this.

Accordingly the architectural imagery of these buildings as well as the concepts involved in their creation (including the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry) were of European or European settler origin. The symmetries and asymmetries of indigenous African architecture did not play a role in the making of these buildings.

Finally, the wider value of the design principles of symmetry and asymmetry in these Edwardian Colonial houses needs to be explored. Architecture, both as an art and as the process of production of a utilitarian artifact, is an accurate mirror of the values of the society of the time. The use of symmetry and asymmetry represents both a development in the technical architectural application of these concepts, as well as a reflection of societal motives and values. Social history as well as architecture may be enriched by a better understanding of these issues.

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