



## How International Style Modernism Came to Dominate in Apartheid Architecture in 1960s South Africa

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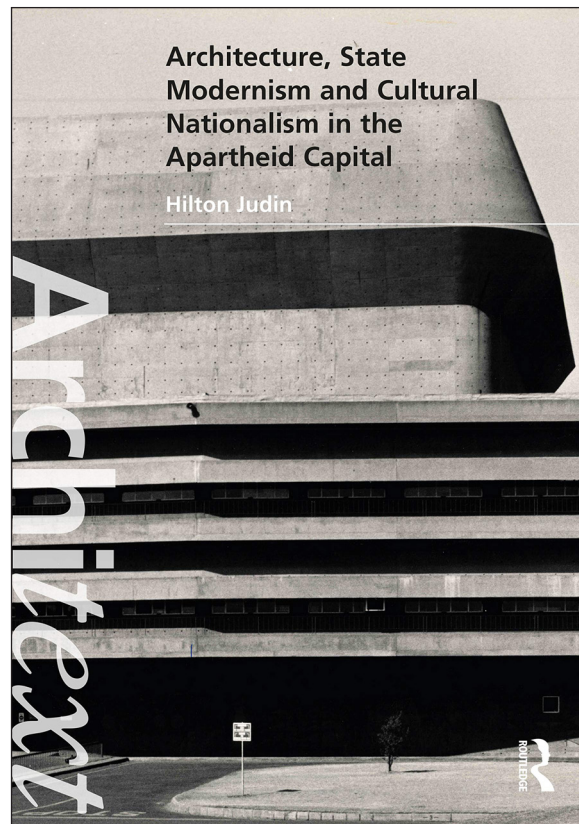
A review of Hilton Judin, *Architecture, State Modernism and Cultural Nationalism in the Apartheid Capital*, part of the *Architext* series, edited by Thomas A. Markus and Anthony D. King, London: Routledge, 2021, 244 pages (ISBN: 978-0-36751-944-5). Judin's book captures a significant moment in South Africa's architectural history: the building boom that accompanied the economic surge of the 1960s. He explores how International Style modernism was harnessed in the design of monumental state buildings in Pretoria, the country's administrative capital and the heartland of Afrikaner nationalism, while simultaneously being used to corral Black residents into segregated dormitory townships on the city's periphery.

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**Keywords:** apartheid architecture; International Style; state buildings; Pretoria

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The 1960s represented the high point of apartheid in South Africa. The National Party government, voted into power in 1948 by an exclusively white electorate, had developed increasing confidence in its own ability to govern and advance the interests of its supporters — Afrikaners who had been previously marginalised in an economy dominated by English speakers. Most significantly, the National Party government demonstrated that it had the power to control the lives of Black inhabitants by corralling them into segregated dormitory townships and suppressing any signs of resistance.

Political domination, in turn, was buoyed by the country's most sustained economic upswing in its existence. Newly discovered reserves of gold and a manufacturing boom ensured a favorable balance of payments. Money flowing into the country from the USA and Europe gave rise to a building boom that fundamentally reshaped the landscape. Cities that had once been dominated by three- and four-storey staid Edwardian structures were now the sites of multistorey high-rises inspired by the International Style.

This is the context for Hilton Judin's *'Architecture, State Modernism and Cultural Nationalism in the Apartheid Capital'*, which explores how a small coterie of mainly Afrikaans-speaking architects, who enjoyed the generous patronage of the state, gave expression to this moment. During this period, these architects designed a series of

monumental public buildings while simultaneously embarking on a project to roll out mass housing in the newly developed, systematically segregated townships that would accommodate Black urban residents.

The book, published in 2021, asks important questions for South African architectural historiography:

‘How were buildings in the capital different from others globally? Were they ever reflective of broader post-war revisions of modernism or a regionalism then in ascendance? What lay behind the repudiation of tradition and the turn to abstraction rather than flagrant cultural symbolism? What was the relationship between an African vernacular in architecture and Afrikaner identity? What role did buildings play in advancing the idea of an Afrikaner *volk* and mustering nationalist sentiment? What, after all this, was the role of the architect under apartheid?’ (xxi)

It will prove a useful guide to readers unfamiliar with South African architecture as well as an important resource for South Africa’s own architectural researchers, laying bare the political and social imperatives that drove the architecture. Judin’s deep research and the new documents and photographs he brings to light make the book particularly valuable and engaging.

Judin is well placed to interrogate these issues. As a philosopher, architectural historian, exhibition curator, and educator, he has, over a period of thirty years, explored the impact of apartheid on South Africa’s architectural landscape, most notably in two exhibitions: *[setting apart]*, a display of apartheid state documents with the History Workshop in Johannesburg and the District Six Museum in Cape Town (1994), and in an exhibition and book titled ‘blank \_\_\_ Architecture, apartheid and after’ (1998) for the Netherlands Architecture Institute.

In setting the scene for this new book, Judin explores the historical origins of Afrikaner nationalism, which arose from the sense of dispossession brought on by the defeat of the two Boer republics at the hands of British imperial forces who wanted control of South Africa’s goldmines. Hankering after an idealised rural past preceding the Anglo-Boer War, Afrikaner nationalist architects, best represented by Gerhard Moerdyk, pursued a style heavily indebted to the Cape Dutch farmsteads of early Boer settlers. But by the 1960s, such nostalgia was increasingly seen as inappropriate for a state intent on demonstrating that it could hold its own amongst other Western powers.

The locus of Judin’s investigation is the city of Pretoria, the executive capital of the country and the historic heart of Afrikaner nationalism. Early graduates of the newly established school of architecture at the University of Pretoria travelled from the city

overseas to see firsthand how a more modern approach might be mobilised in the construction of a modern state. Architects included AL Meiring, the first professor of architecture at the University of Pretoria, his partner David Francois Hugo Naude, along with Norman Eaton, Brian Sandrock, Petrus Burger, Toot Neetling, and Dieter Holm.

Cultural references to a rural past were to be expunged and replaced by new structures built on a monumental scale. These came to embody the new muscular approach of the state, as Judin writes: ‘Modern was seen as a reflection of an unburdened cultural destiny and access by Afrikaners to new economic opportunities. ... As capitalism and cultural nationalism aligned, architects were quick to adopt an International Style in matching the goals and rhetoric of the apartheid regime’ (2).

Judin analyses a number of Pretoria’s iconic modernist buildings in order to develop his argument. He examines the Transvaal Provincial Administration Headquarters; the Kunsmuseum (Civic Art Museum); three new buildings at the rapidly growing University of Pretoria, including the Musaion (Music Center), the Buitemuursegebou (Extramural Building), the JG Strijdomgebou vir Ingeneurswese (JG Strijdom Building for Engineering, which is now known as Engineering II Building); the Wachthuis Building, or police headquarters; and the Munitoria building, the new municipal administrative building. Pretoria architects paid deference in these buildings to the International Style.

The most revelatory chapter of Judin’s book by far concerns the architecture of the Atomic Research Centre in Pelindaba, on the outskirts of the city. For it, Judin mobilises formerly classified material from the National Nuclear Research Centre to expose the state’s nuclear ambitions. Brian Sandrock, a graduate of the University of Pretoria’s Department of Architecture, was awarded the commission, and the resulting complex of buildings, including offices and a reactor building, ‘offered Nationalists a profound way to strategically position themselves internationally for the Atomic Age’ (30).

According to Judin, the complex, built during the 1960s, was inspired by the *béton brut* of post-war buildings such as Unité d’Habitation and by other late works by Le Corbusier like the chapel Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp and relied on the exposure of raw material, curved forms, and rough textured detail. Judin notes that the exaggerated steeple of the reactor building is ‘not unlike the truncated cones employed by Le Corbusier in the Assembly at Chandigarh’ (37). However, there was also a concerted effort to root the building in its local context: ‘In the case of Pelindaba, the concrete construction was transformed with the sand and gravel from the site ... which blends more comfortably with the surrounding terrain’ (35).

The buildings in Pelindaba were arrayed on the site in such a way as to separate hot from cold zones in the event of a radiation leak. The advice of John Fassler, then

head of the more liberal University of the Witwatersrand architecture school and an English speaker, was sought during the planning phase, indicating the extent to which all sectors of the profession were implicated in the project. Expressing much the same enthusiasm as his nationalist counterparts, he argued that ‘the whole scheme might well be regarded as a symbol of the Republic of South Africa’s progress as an emerging modern industrial state’ (44).

While International Style tropes and architectural forms derived from the European masters undoubtedly animated most of Pretoria’s public architecture, on occasion local architects sought inspiration closer to home, mobilising elements from vernacular African architecture, or so-called tribal culture. This use of the vernacular was seen as particularly appropriate when the beneficiaries of the architecture were themselves African — in this case, Pretoria’s Black residents, who, like Black inhabitants in other South African cities, were at this time being systematically removed from their homes and herded into new ‘model native townships’. Here the development of housing was caught up in the

rhetoric of ethnic difference and paternal authority. ... ‘Respect for other cultures’ involved calculated efforts by the apartheid state to distinguish those designated ‘European’ from ‘non-European’. ... In this complex discriminatory process, traditional vernacular architecture was addressed by architects and anthropologists through a narrow ethnographical view as a decorative, even superficial, embellishment. Invariably it was one in which there was no room for individual black artists and builders to innovate. It could never be understood as resistance or endurance but rather as succumbing to universalising trends in modernism. (83)

African motifs made one important appearance in Pretoria’s city center, in the police headquarters building designed by Norman Eaton. Inspired by his travels in other parts of Africa, he used African patterns and geometries to articulate the floor surface of an arcade and stairs running through the center of the building. However, these motifs are merely a detail in what is otherwise an International Style building — ‘a glass cabinet’ — which fulfilled all the needs of a growing administrative government department.

International readers may find that the book assumes prior knowledge of the South African context from the colonial era onwards. Those interested may need to read a general South African history first. Nonetheless, this is an important addition to South Africa’s architectural history, worthy of the attention of a wider audience interested in the complex ways ideological and economic forces inform architectural practice.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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