

Earthen architecture; shifting the heritage focus from outsider to the implicated



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ABSTRACT:

Having attended Terra 2003 in Yazd, and realising the difference in reality as perceived between preservation in the first world nations and basic repair in developing countries at the least, but generally demolition by neglect through association with regime, poverty and perception, I have endeavoured to analyse the means by which practical heritage conservation can become more viable in poor and developing countries.

I have known for a long time that unless conservation of the historic built environment is punted with a development angle in third world nations, particularly post colonial societies, where the priorities are shelter, food, education, work and health, the notions of preserving elements of the past belonging to somebody else as a cultural reference point in the future are both a waste of time and money and riddled with problems.

In addition, many of the proponents for conservation of adobe and earth based structures do not themselves live in buildings comprised of mud, nor do they have need for the basic necessities of electrification, water provision and waste removal, as it already forms a necessary part of their existing urban infrastructures. Often, a romanticisation of poverty on the part of these critics further embeds the divide between the haves and the have nots, and contributes greatly to the dismissal of these structures as poor and rough by those who live in them, often who have created them over the decades and centuries.

In my project, Georgetown, Edendale, I have been working sporadically with a local Zulu community repairing the fabric of Victorian period mud brick structures. Lack of funding and my work commitments mean that this happens on occasion rather than with regularity, but its contribution to the discourse of living in and working on adobe type structures, and the effects that it can have on lives, perceptions and aspirations is part of my greater study. I believe strongly that a project of this nature can begin to inform approaches by the West towards dealing with other peoples cultures, and that the levels of prescription should be rewritten to be more accommodating of different economic and perceptual places. This would make preservation of these structures part of an economic norm, rather than be seen as an outwardly imposed set of preservation rules.